



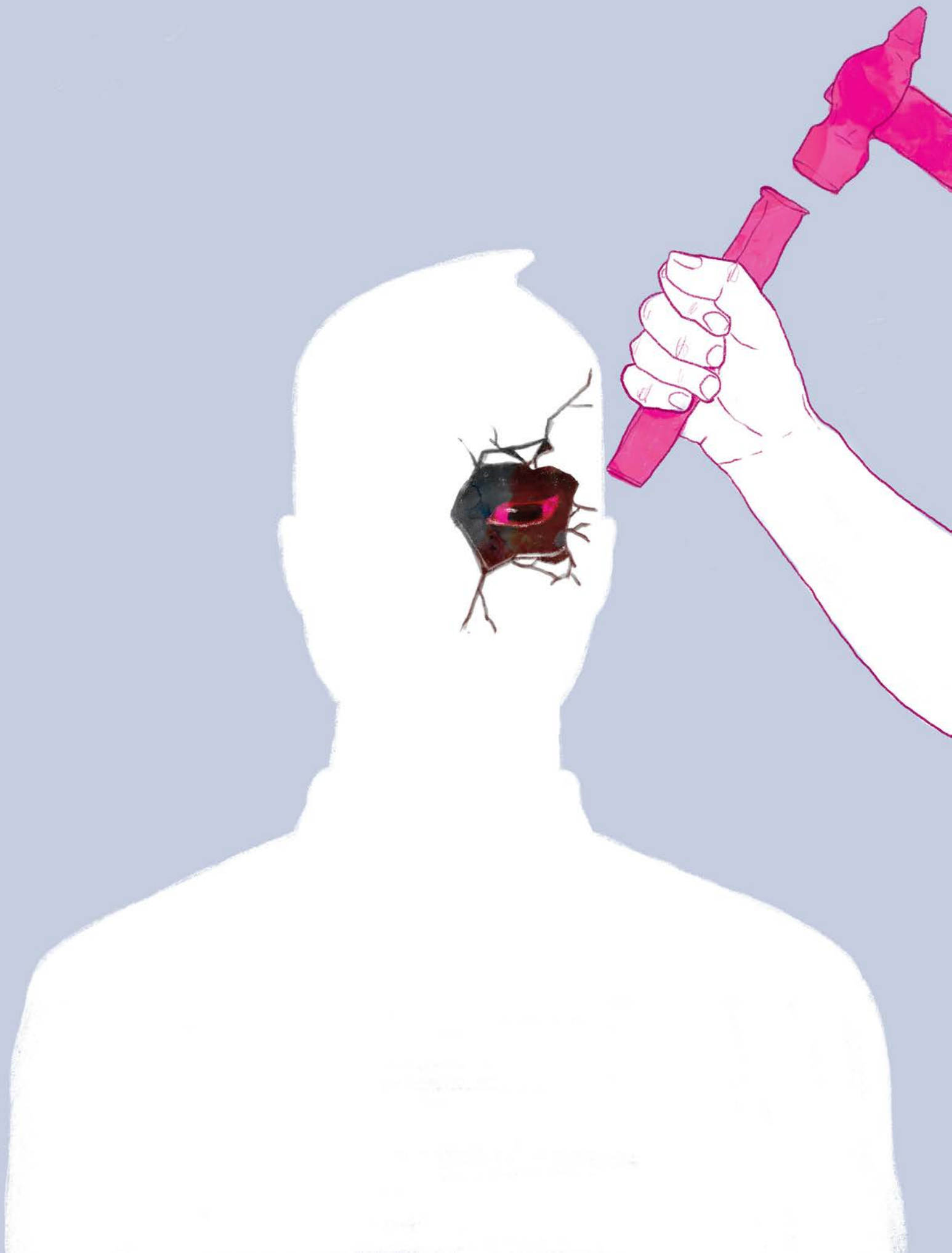
Architects of Networked Disinformation

Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and
Fake News Production in the Philippines

By Jonathan Corpus Ong & Jason Vincent A. Cabañes



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



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**Public Report
with
Executive Summary**

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Overview

No technology has been weaponized at such an unprecedented global scale as social media.

Diverse research approaches now attempt to decipher how laptop screens and smartphones around the world are used to manipulate public debate, hijack mainstream media agenda, and influence political outcomes.

In the Philippines, the names on the lips of political pundits and the mainstream press are those of the social media influencers who command large “troll armies” credited with sweeping Rodrigo Duterte into unforeseen election victory in 2016. Under Duterte’s presidency, “trolls”, or “Dutertards” as his fanatic followers have been dubbed, are seen to have debased political discourse and silenced dissidents in their vociferous sharing of fake news and

amplification of hate speech. But who exactly is responsible for leading disinformation campaigns? What kind of people sign up to become “trolls”, and what industries and social groups do they come from? What technical skill sets do they have, and how do their labor conditions shape the campaigns they create? Most crucially, how do they justify the work that they do and live with the stigma of being labeled a “troll”?

Through interviews and participant observation of people we call **architects of networked disinformation**, our study uncovers the professionalized and hierarchized group of political operators who design disinformation campaigns, mobilize click armies, and execute innovative “digital black ops” and “signal scrambling” techniques for any interested political client. This report reveals that disinformation architects are a crucial and common part of Filipino political campaigns at both national and local levels—employed by many politicians regardless of party and ideology.

Stemming from the Philippines’ image-based political system, the chief architects of networked disinformation come from the advertising and PR industry, whose mastery in corporate marketing hyperextends to an unregulated and highly profitable industry of digital political campaigning.

Conveniently hidden behind the smoke-screen of prominent social media influencers who fan the flames of political divisiveness and stoke the public’s moral panics about trolling,

ad and PR executives assemble their own teams of anonymous digital influencers and community-level fake account operators.

Tasked to translate core campaign messages, these anonymous influencers and fake account operators weaponize their fluency with the popular vernacular in covert digital operations designed to mobilize populist public sentiment. While the basic blueprint of political disinformation campaigns may appear similar to corporate brand strategy, networked disinformation involves many moral compromises: from seeding revisionist history narratives to silencing political opponents to hijacking news media attention through artificially trending hashtags.

Drawing from the tradition of production studies in media and communications research, our study contributes an ethnographically informed understanding of how the personal motivations, social backgrounds, and everyday routines of digital workers impact on their production of networked disinformation and fake news. Our study aims to move beyond easy dichotomies of heroes and villains and does not seek to name and shame individual paid trolls.

The problem of disinformation production goes deeper than any one caricatured hero or celebrity villain; it is systemic, deeply rooted, and entwined in the cultural fabric of Philippine society. Behind the madness is an invisible machine: industrial in its scope and organization, strategic in its outlook and expertise, and exploitative in its morality and ethics. At the helm of the machine, the chief architects of disinformation hide in plain sight, wearing respectable faces, sidestepping accountability while the public's moral panics about trolling are directed elsewhere.

This report thus aims to develop a critique of ecological vulnerabilities in the creative industries in the Philippines that enable politicians to recruit highly skilled, if corruptible, disinformation architects to collude with them without industry self-regulatory mechanisms and sanctions in place. This report also identifies large gaps in Philippine campaign finance legislation and digital platform regulation, and proposes preliminary recommendations to address these issues. Finally, the study aims to invite ethical reflection about the process in which ordinary people become complicit in deception work as they aspire for financial gain or seek political and symbolic power. Through the set of preliminary recommendations we present, we open the conversation as to how we can reinvigorate professional ethics, uphold worker justice, and create cross-sectoral advisory groups with lawyers, academics, platform designers, and creative professionals to address our individual, social and cultural complicity in networked disinformation.

In this report, we:

- 1** Narrate “deep stories” of individual workers positioned at different levels of the hierarchy, not to vilify them but to understand their motivations and social backgrounds
- 2** Discuss the labor arrangements that underpin networked disinformation in order to reveal the vulnerabilities of professional industries and institutions to political deception work
- 3** Discuss the persuasive techniques that architects of networked disinformation deploy in mobilizing populist sentiment to further clients’ elite agendas and for their own economic and political gain
- 4** List preliminary recommendations aimed at every level of fake news production’s hierarchical structure

Seven Key Findings

1

The use of fake accounts and paid influencers on Facebook and Twitter for political operations is widespread. Multiple political parties at both national and local levels make use of “click armies”. Previous reports¹ have spotlighted only Duterte’s Partido Demokratiko Pilipino Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) as hiring fake account operators, thus overlooking the systematic manipulation of political discussions on Facebook and Twitter by various players across the political spectrum.

2

Politicians often employ campaign strategists from local “boutique” advertising and PR agencies as chief architects of networked disinformation campaigns. These experts use tried-and-tested corporate branding techniques such as “core campaign messaging” and “brand bibles”, while exploiting ecological vulnerabilities in the unregulated industry of political marketing. They also deploy sketchy new digital strategies such as what we label “signal scrambling” and “digital black ops” to distort trending rankings and hack the attention of mainstream media.

¹ Bradshaw, Samantha and Philip Howard. 2017. Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation. <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf>; Jenkins, Ciaran. 2017. “Fake News: Trolling in the Philippines.” Channel 4, 10 February. <https://www.channel4.com/news/fake-news-trolling-in-the-philippines>; Ressa, Maria. 2016. “Propaganda War: Weaponizing the Internet.” Rappler, 3 October. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/148007-propaganda-war-weaponizing-internet>

3

Ad and PR strategists delegate political marketing responsibility. They rely heavily on the promotional labor of digital influencers (who have between 50,000 to 2,000,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter) and community-level fake account operators (who manually operate fake profiles to infiltrate community groups and news pages)—and very minimally on automated bots. While the ad and PR strategists are usually paid a lump sum by their political clients on a per-project basis, they subcontract work to influencers and pay them following PR industry standard matrices of reach and engagement. Community-level fake account operators are paid a fixed daily rate based on a set quota of online posts or comments. The incentive scheme that the strategists set for the influencers and account operators maximizes potentials for the signal boosting of communication messages that strategically use popular vernaculars resonant with populist public sentiments.

4

Disinformation workers are financially, politically, socially, and psychologically driven in different ways. The infrastructure of networked disinformation is built on a relationship of competitive collegialities. The people we interviewed are primarily driven by financial motivations, but most of them are actually politically aligned with their client. A few justified their engagement in the work of fake news production with the psychosocial fulfillment of doing edgy, experimental work. Many of our respondents entered digital underground work after being disillusioned in the creative industries from witnessing first-hand systematic corruption and/or experiencing exploitative work arrangements.

5

Operating fake accounts for politicians involves similar modes of always-on, flexible, and (self-)exploitative arrangements as other online freelance work. However it is accompanied by the stressful emotional labor of justifying this work both to others and themselves. Workers develop implicit rules to establish a moral order and distance themselves from the stigma around trolling. The workers we met claimed to avoid using sexist language in their fake accounts and attributed the use of offensive language to “real people” or “real supporters” of their political client. Many workers view their fake account operations as one sideline among many, and expressed a wish to be judged based on their primary jobs and/or future aspirations.

6

Networked disinformation campaigns operate with two opposing dynamics in play. On the one hand, **controlled interactivity aims for collective participation and cooperation among disinformation workers who are informed by a common script; on the other, volatile virality relies on these workers' individual insight and creativity in translating a script into social media posts that achieve maximum, if uncontrolled, spreadability** across decentralized networks of communicative exchange. Emotionally charged campaigns tapping into populist sentiments of anger and resentment may thus achieve their strategic goals, but inadvertently unleash uncivil expressions of misogyny, anti-intellectualism, and other forms of offensive speech into the public discourse.

7

While nobody really admits to being a troll, everyone in the disinformation hierarchy seems to be engaged in various degrees of trolling. Many workers justify their use of fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter as a mere extension of the longstanding ad and PR practice of using spin. Ordinary citizens have long tolerated deception work from “legitimate sources”—corporate brands, celebrities, journalists and oligarchic media. This long-standing acceptance paved the way for political disinformation to thrive unregulated in a digital underground that only very subtly hides from plain sight.

Our full report argues that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the complex problem of networked disinformation. While efforts to blacklist fake news websites, expose fake accounts, or vilify divisive digital influencers may sometimes be well-meaning, these solutions do not address the institutions and systems that professionalize and incentivize disinformation production. The project reflects on the vulnerabilities in the Philippine political culture and creative industries that entice digital workers to become architects of disinformation. It also reflects on the potentially far-reaching consequences of the “stockpile of digital weapons” in the Philippines, with its highly organized online freelance labor force, to democratic countries in the West, and vice versa. Policy recommendations in the report address:

- Advertising and PR industry self-regulation
- Political campaign finance regulation
- News media coverage and investigative reportage of fake news and trolling
- Platform intermediary regulation responding to particular concerns of fragile democracies in the global South

We also advance new concepts to deepen our understanding of the operations of networked disinformation:

- 1 **Disinformation interface:** the porous boundaries between so-called “paid troll” work executed by influencers and fake account operators and the enthusiastic zeal of political fans and grassroots intermediaries
- 2 **Moral justifications:** the denial strategies and mental acrobatics that disinformation architects perform to dismiss their own personal responsibility to democratic processes and political exchange. Moral justifications include discourses of normalization (“I do the same thing for corporate brands”), fictionalization (“This is straight out of Game of Thrones”), and splitting (“This is just a sideline and not my real job”).
- 3 **Competitive collegialities:** the working relationships that disinformation producers have with each other. This is about how they are compelled to work together even if their professional aspirations are ultimately at odds with each other. While chief disinformation architects want to maintain the work hierarchy they established, lower-level political operators aim to overcome the power asymmetries.
- 4 **Volatile virality:** a key principle of promotional communication that runs alongside what Jennifer Stromer-Galley² has called “controlled interactivity”. While controlled interactivity is concerned about message discipline throughout a campaign, we identify that it is challenged by an opposing principle of volatile virality, which is concerned with message amplification through the use of populist rhetorical styles resonant with political fans and grassroots supporters.

² Stromer-Galley, Jennifer. 2014. *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF NETWORKED DISINFORMATION

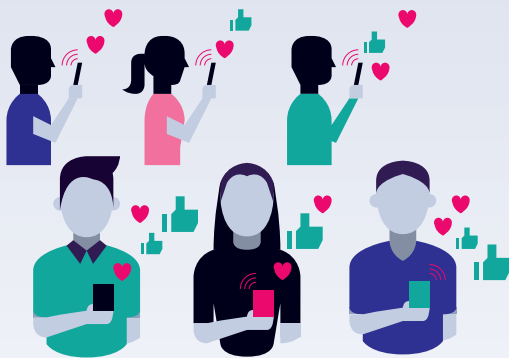
REFERENCE: Ong, J.C. & Cabanes, J.V. (2018). Architects of Networked Disinformation

Political Clients



Chief Architects of Networked Disinformation

Elite advertising and PR strategists: they liaise with political clients and set campaign objectives



Digital Influencers

Anonymous Influencers:

Anonymous operators of social media pages with humorous/ inspirational/ pop culture content: they translate campaign messages into viral posts

Key Opinion Leaders:

Celebrities and pundits with highly engaged fans and followers on social media: they carry core campaign messages



Community-Level Fake Account Operators

Precarious middle-class workers subcontracted by ad and PR strategists or hired by politicians' chief-of-staff: they amplify reach and create "illusions of engagement"



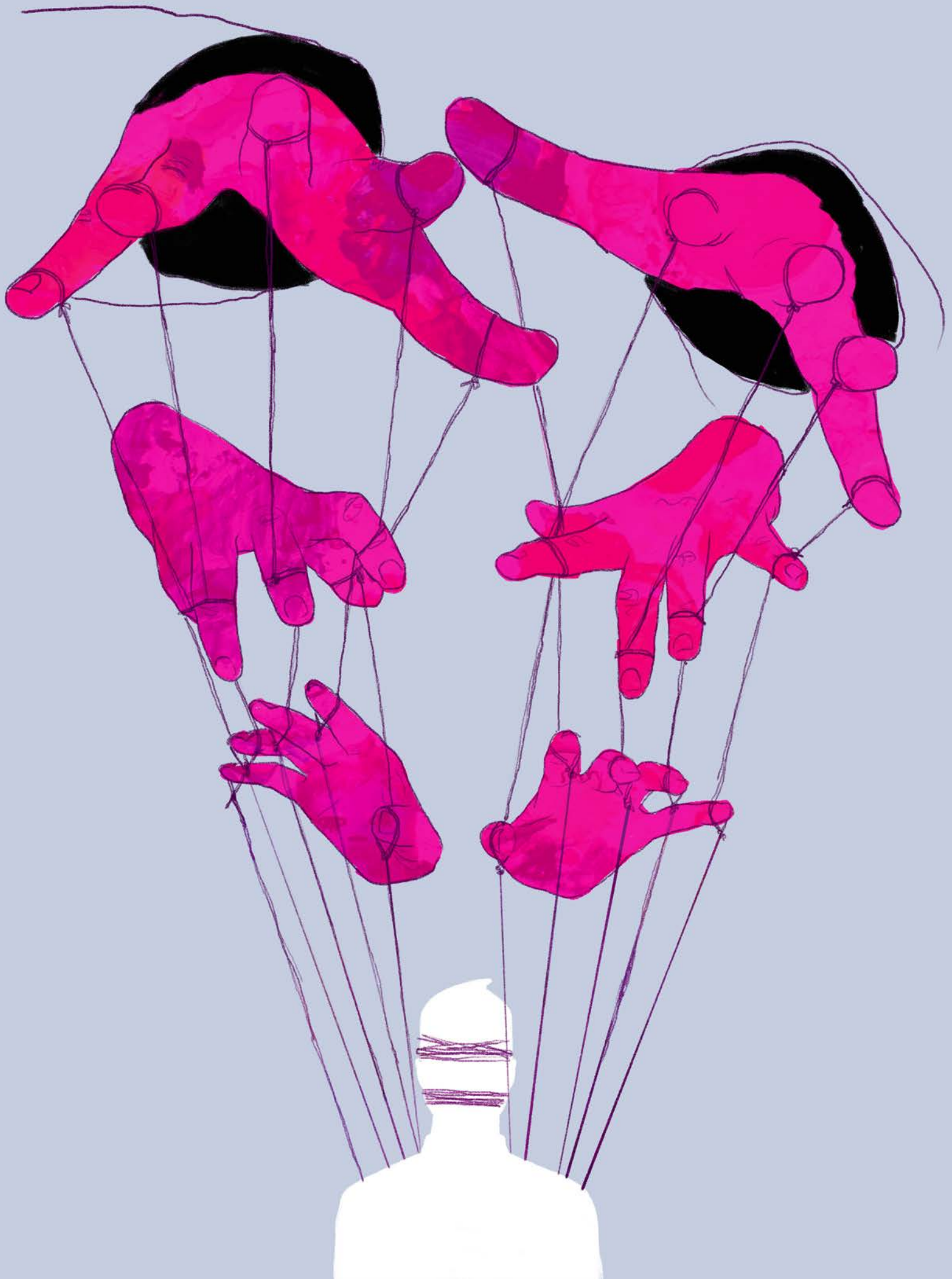
Grassroots Intermediaries

Politician's fan page moderators, unpaid opinion leaders, volunteer political organizers

PUBLIC

PAID

VOLUNTARY



Chapter 1

Sketching Out a Blueprint of Networked Disinformation: A Production Studies Approach

Several days before the November 2016 US elections, *Buzzfeed* broke a story about university students in the town of Veles, Macedonia operating a hub of impostor news sites circulating sensationalist or false content as clickbait to supporters of Donald Trump.² Unlike other forms of fake news and propaganda that were ideologically invested in national policy issues such as Brexit in the UK,³ or an illiberal agenda to disrupt national democratic systems, such as Russian government intervention in the US elections,⁴ the Macedonian case was reported to be driven by a naive, if misguided, youthful entrepreneurship. As *Wired* magazine put it,

*“These Macedonians on Facebook didn’t care if Trump won or lost the White House. They only wanted pocket money to pay for things—a car, watches, better cell phones, more drinks at the bar. This is the arrhythmic, disturbing heart of the affair: that the internet made it so simple for these young men to finance their material whims and that their actions helped deliver such momentous consequences”.*⁵

The news coverage and analysis of the Macedonian fake news factory, along with related news of a Singaporean teenager who was hired to do political micro-work for the Trump campaign out of a digital work platform,⁶ were inspired our exploratory search for similar workers producing digital disinformation in the Philippines—either for political clients internally or overseas. Funded by a British Council Newton Fund grant, those of us in the Newton Tech4Dev Network⁷ who were investigating so-called “digital sweatshops” in the Philippines grew curious about the labor conditions and social identities of digital workers involved in disinformation production. We considered comparing the

² Silverman and Alexander 2016.

³ Grice 2017.

⁴ Burgess 2017.

⁵ Subramanian 2017.

⁶ Ming 2016.

⁷ One research stream of the Newton Tech4Dev Network explores the conditions of digital workers in the Philippines. Surpassing India as the call center hub of the world, it occupies a coveted position in the global economy of outsourcing. Also known as the “social media capital” of the world, the Philippines has a highly connected and available digital workforce, many of whom also get digital gig work from online portals. Both state and industry are invested in promoting the benefits of digital work, even referring to such workers as “new national heroes” (bagong bayani). See David 2015 and www.newtontechfordev.com.

conditions of highly stressful and always-on labor arrangements of data entry specialists and social media content moderators with authors of fake news and political “troll armies”. After all, provocative commentary by digital media and information studies scholars such as Antonio Casilli⁸ and Sarah Roberts⁹ have suggested that beyond the social media infrastructures that have distorted democratic exchange by perniciously clustering online communities into filter bubbles, research should also consider the consequences of invisible digital labor arrangements to democratic processes, nationally and transnationally.¹⁰

Crucially within the Philippine public sphere, mainstream media, policymakers, and the Catholic Church bemoan the toxic incivility and proliferation of disinformation in online political discourse in the run-up to the May 2016 Philippine elections. Populist leader Rodrigo Duterte’s victory is credited in large part to a groundswell of grassroots support that was amplified by and visualized in social media. Many of Duterte’s critics attribute heightened “indecentcy” in political discourse to his legion of supporters, often described and generalized as “trolls” and “cyber pests”¹¹ motivated by “blind loyalty”¹² to Duterte and emboldened by his use of “gutter language”.¹³ These critics use the label “*Dutertard*”¹⁴ interchangeably with “troll” to shame these supporters, thus creating a rhetorical cycle of hateful confrontation across political camps.

Duterte’s critics are right to point out the increased vitriol in online political discussions among Filipinos. What this moral panic often ignores, however, is the very real discontent that Duterte’s supporters are expressing. Their angry tone is a resounding rejection of the “politics of decency” that they associate with the oligarchic elite political establishment, which they feel has not brought about any palpable change in their everyday lives.¹⁵ It is also the product of a negotiation between “the politics of anxiety and the politics of hope”,¹⁶ as it instantiates their desire for “a game-changer who would finally recognize and act on their concerns”.¹⁷ It is in this light that one might better understand the toxic incivility of political discussion in the Philippines today, which is clearly a marked departure for Filipino social media where interactions have previously conformed with middle-class norms of respectability¹⁸ and cultural norms of circumspection and reciprocity.¹⁹

⁸ Casilli 2016.

⁹ Roberts 2016.

¹⁰ Casilli 2016.

¹¹ Yang 2016.

¹² Palatino 2017.

¹³ Rosario 2016.

¹⁴ An offensive play of words: *Duterte and retard*.

¹⁵ Many of the vocal Duterte supporters on social media come from the precarious middle class or the aspiring working class. Amongst them, many are disappointed because of the perceived failure of the preceding Aquino administration to fulfill its campaign promise of lifting Filipinos out of poverty by espousing a “politics of decency” premised on taking the “Daang Matuwid” (or Righteous Path) (see Heydarian, 2018). Despite the effective anti-corruption initiatives and stellar economic growth credited to the Aquino government, the middle class continued to “suffer from the high cost of living, poor delivery of basic services, and the everyday struggle of to stay safe and secure within their homes and properties” (Deinla, 2017).

¹⁶ Curato 2016.

¹⁷ Cabañes and Cornelio 2017.

¹⁸ Cabañes and Ong 2011.

¹⁹ Madianou and Miller 2012; McKay 2016.

While liberal elite circles simplistically label Duterte supporters as brainwashed or uneducated lower-class mobs (an assumption misleadingly reproduced in global media coverage of “exotic” Philippine politics), several scholars such as Nicole Curato and Cleve Arguelles provide a more nuanced but equally critical view of Duterte’s populist appeal. Rather than perceiving Duterte supporters as “fanatics”, Arguelles argues that populist publics view Duterte’s “political performance” as “giv[ing] voice to the miserable, bring[ing] authenticity to politics, and reflect[ing] persistent political will”.²⁰ Curato thoughtfully suggests that while Duterte’s “penal populism” may indeed give voice to citizen’s fears and demands, it should not discount the fact that it also “silences ‘the dangerous other’” who are viewed as “enemies that should be eradicated”.²¹ This us-versus-them narrative is one feature that characterizes “populist political style”²² as seen in the way Duterte and social media influencers discredit and silence dissent, and foster a culture of impunity, implicitly encouraging their grassroots supporters to digitally bully and “troll” journalists and the publications they work and perceive to be critical of the current administration.

As seen in similar incidents in Russia,²³ journalistic trolling extends beyond just negative speech and vitriol on comments sections of news sites, but goes as far as death threats and deployment of state agency apparatus—investigative bodies that arbitrarily harass and silence publications for various “business violations”.²⁴ Journalists are “under pressure” with the President’s pronouncements against them.²⁵ The stifling and silencing of the press is especially alarming when experienced in light of the broader culture of impunity under Duterte’s regime, where the war on drugs has killed an estimate of 3,933 and four journalist killings recorded since he took office.²⁶ These figures suggest that political trolling in the Philippines is not confined to verbal abuse but can escalate to physical or even mortal harm.

Mainstream media coverage and civil society efforts to address disinformation focus on the “state-sponsored” or “patriotic” trolling that is said to be organized by the administration. Proposed solutions, such as the creation of watchdogs and intersectoral alliances that could defend against disinformation, are few. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) issued a pastoral letter calling out fake news as being against “human intellect of the truth” and a “sin against charity”.²⁷ They condemned fake news purveyors by releasing a list of 29 websites that allegedly contain “fake or

²⁰ Arguelles 2017, ii.

²¹ Curato 2016, 106.

²² Moffit and Tormey 2014.

²³ Moffit and Tormey 2014.

²⁴ Press alliances and civil society organizations have urged the government to address journalist killings. However, the President is perceived to sending “wrong signals” when he had commented in a press conference that journalists are killed “because they are corrupt”. The Southeast Asian Press Alliance expressed they were “deeply disturbed” with the President’s statement and stated that his statement is “irresponsible and dangerous as these send the wrong signal about the work of journalists”. See SEAPA 2016.

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²⁶ The figures are from the Philippine National Police Directorate for Investigation and Detective Management, see published news report by Talabong 2017.

²⁷ Villegas 2017.

unverified content”.²⁸ Other journalists have also advocated lobbying Facebook to take responsibility in taking down offensive speech and censoring accounts perceived to engage in state-sponsored trolling.²⁹

However, we argue that Philippine media and civil society’s response, by selectively blacklisting pages or people while excluding or even hero-worshipping others that share similarly anonymous and hyperpartisan content, is incomplete and misleading.³⁰ We echo the caution that US scholars Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan express toward emerging fact-checking mechanisms, when they say that such methods “can quickly backfire when people question the authority of those who create the labels... An organization labelling something as ‘fake’ should provide full transparency around how it makes its ‘blacklists’”.³¹ While such proposals may mean well, they may end up further polarizing political camps if criteria for labeling are mystified, sanctimoniously adjudicated, and/or fail to be inclusive of perspectives from diverse stakeholders. **This report further argues that efforts at fact-checking and blacklisting while well-meaning do not address the underlying causes of disinformation by failing to address the professionalized and institutionalized work structures and financial incentives that normalize and reward “paid troll” work.**

Our report aims to understand the impact of how various disinformation campaigns collectively create a public sphere filled with information pollution and, consequently, with toxic incivility and polarization. We look at state-sponsored trolling and how the deployment of click armies contributes to political silencing and even the consolidation of revisionist historical narratives that can have long-term consequences to political processes and future elections. At the same time, we also take into account trolling from other political quarters and how these equally contribute to the prevailing information disorder. In Chapter 4, we pay specific attention to disinformation architects’ use of the populist political style in deploying disinformation techniques that open up spaces of grievance, reinforce political divisions, and fan the flames of discontent.

At the same time, our report aims to take a longer view of political deception. We argue that an inquiry into the work structure of digital disinformation reveals a professionalized and normalized hierarchy headed by disinformation architects who are culturally embedded in the promotional industries, and are dependent on the complicity of professional elites in advertising and PR as well as underpaid digital and creative workers.

²⁸ Some of these websites are already included in the list that the National Union Journalist of the Philippines (NUJP) also flagged as fake news through a web plug-in called “Fakeblok” (see details here: <https://fakeblok.com/>). The tool marks Facebook posts which share content from the blacklisted sites.

²⁹ Maria Ressa of online news platform Rappler is the lead proponent of such initiatives, see Etter 2017. Her pessimism about Facebook and its impact on democracy is shared by other mainstream media journalists such as Howie Severino of GMA Network.

³⁰ For a nuanced critique of mainstream media’s selectiveness in their watchdog campaign against hyperpartisan pages in social media, we recommend reading Katrina Stuart-Santiago’s take on an incident where a once-anonymous blogger supporting the opposition party was conferred “hero” status by mainstream media outlets in spite of reproducing content that is similarly divisive and offensive. See Stuart-Santiago 2018.

³¹ Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 64.

Over the course of our exploratory work from December 2016 to December 2017, we have in fact failed to deliver evidence to the original question of outsourced “digital sweatshop” political work, which we started with. Where we succeeded was in uncovering the systematic work infrastructure behind the production of disinformation in local politics. We met high-level political strategists, digital influencers, and fake account operators who gave us insight into how each type of digital laborer fits into a networked disinformation architecture serving local political clients.

Networked disinformation here refers to the organized production of political deception that distributes responsibilities to diverse and loosely interconnected groups of hierarchized digital workers.³² In our field site of Metro Manila, we met digital strategists who hold day jobs in advertising and public relations firms, doing corporate marketing for high-profile household brands. We met the anonymous digital influencers they work with: the online micro-celebrities who maintain humorous and compelling digital personas that attract between 50,000 and 2,000,000 followers. We also met lower-level workers who operate fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter, doing subcontracted piecemeal digital work while also doing more conventional office jobs.

When it comes to the production of disinformation, the digital sweatshop is diverse and temporal. Floating “trolling hackathons” or intense 24-hour periods of monitoring, producing and spreading content, and commenting across social media platforms to support and defend their candidate take place anywhere from a politician’s office in their provincial bailiwick before a preplanned media event, or from a five-star hotel room booked by the lead strategist. The latter provides an aspirational backdrop that entices financially driven digital workers and fosters the right “team spirit” to carry on with what is seen as shameful, stigmatized work.

This report aims to sketch out a blueprint of the architecture of networked disinformation in the Philippines’ digital underground, based on twenty (20) in-depth interviews with people we call **“architects of networked disinformation”**. We supplement these interviews with participant observation of various digital campaigns on Facebook and Twitter, and insider access to fake accounts via passwords shared with us by our informants.

In sketching out this architecture and narrating ethnographic “portraits” of individual workers (made anonymous following ethics protocols), our aim is to invite discussion and debate. We call on other experts to fill in the missing pieces of the blueprint which are intentionally withheld or obscured by

³² We find most useful Wardle & Derakshan’s definition of disinformation: “when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.” They contrast this with misinformation (“when false information is shared, but no harm is meant”) and malinformation (“when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere”). See Wardle & Derakshan 2017, p. 5.

our informants, such as the financing or the traceability of digital campaigns (i.e., do digital campaign spends of politicians actually match their declared campaign contributions or income?). We invite other researchers to come forth and provide nuance to procedures and personalities we may judge harshly, but actually know little about. For example, how does the advertising and PR industry deal with the “open secrets” of corporate partners consulting for political clients? Where do they draw the line in subcontracting digital influencers to enhance the image of corporate brands? We invite legal experts to weigh in on the implications of our findings for reform in electoral campaign legislation, and ask technology experts and civil society to discuss their challenges in lobbying platform intermediaries such as Facebook and Google to engage with the socio-political context of the Philippines.

This project also grapples with the question facing both advanced liberal democracies and fragile states today: what exactly is the role that media and communications technologies play in the rise of global populism? This is a question that is often answered in highly media-centric and technologically deterministic ways. Previous research often overstate the significant effects of sublime new technologies, with little emphasis given to the social context, institutional forces, and deep histories of populist publics. For instance, an Oxford Internet Institute study on the use of bots in online political discourse in the US argued that they have a “fairly heavy handed role in amplifying political messages”,³³ which they assume “make downstream contributions to a slew of political behaviours, including voting”.³⁴ While this study helps us understand the use of automated software to rig trending rankings and direct conversation in a variety of international campaigns, we need empirical evidence that situates disinformation technologies within multiplatform campaign infrastructures undertaken in specific national contexts. As we illustrate in Chapters 3 and 4, disinformation in the Philippines is designed to spread across various “audience touch points”, and chief disinformation architects distort trending rankings by skillfully deploying creative workers to tap into populist public sentiment through weaponizing local popular vernaculars.

We agree here with Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy who identify a revival of “hypodermic needle” accounts of powerful media effects in recent media research on disinformation, where publics are assumed to be passive, gullible, and uninformed in the face of “fake news” while confined in their social media filter bubbles.³⁵ Certainly, critical capacities to assess content and reject and negotiate meanings have been widely documented in studies of old and new media audiences,³⁶ just as digital anthropology has powerfully argued that digital media practices make visible existing cultural norms rather than radically change user behaviors.³⁷

³³ Woolley and Guilbeault 2017, 10.

³⁴ Woolley and Guilbeault 2017, 13.

³⁵ Chakravartty and Roy 2017, 4076.

³⁶ Livingstone and Das 2013.

³⁷ Miller 2011.

In this study, we take up the challenge of Chakravartty and Roy to trace the historical antecedents of mediatized populism, thinking through how new social media affordances for political exchange map onto entrenched political systems, class hierarchies, and social dynamics in a developing country context with deep histories of populist sentiment. Thus we develop an account of the architecture of networked disinformation that is inherently social, discussing how architects of disinformation draw from institutional knowledge, professional skills, and interpersonal relationships when innovating techniques of political deception. Rather than psychologizing them or diagnosing the pathologies of populism, our primary aim here is to understand the social and cultural forces and institutions that make complicity and collusion with populist leaders easier.

This approach requires empathy and an enlarged imagination rather than knee-jerk judgment. For this we turn to the valuable ethnographic work of understanding the sense-making processes of populist publics, such as Arlie Hochschild's³⁸ work with white working-class voters in Louisiana and Hillary Pilkington's³⁹ ethnography of members of the English Defense League in the UK. Their work invites us to dive into the complex rationalities and recognize the "deep stories" behind populist publics' anger and resentment.

We build on their work in two ways. First, we unpack the ways in which networked disinformation architects have strategically weaponized populist publics' anger and resentment with the establishment, by taking tried-and-tested techniques in corporate marketing to the extreme in digital political campaigns. Second, we advance a comparative perspective to Euro-American literature on global populism through a specific inquiry to the Philippines case. We are inspired by the growing literature on populism in the Philippines, such as Nicole Curato's illuminating writings about Duterte's supporters in disaster-afflicted slums in central Philippines.⁴⁰ Unlike the working-class Americans who feel left behind as "strangers in their own land",⁴¹ the Filipino populist public feels as if they are finally finding a voice through new opportunities for speech in social media. We build on Curato's work by expanding on her focus on the rationalities of "working class" or "lower class" Duterte supporters, and paying attention to the precarious middle class and professional elites who are complicit with an exploitative system for as long as they gain or maintain power for themselves. Here we assign moral culpability to these workers, particularly to the chief disinformation architects from the ad and PR industry, who personally benefit from this work arrangement while completely denying personal responsibility and evading professional and political accountability for the dangerous outcomes of their work.

³⁸ Hochschild 2016.

³⁹ Pilkington 2016.

⁴⁰ Curato 2016.

⁴¹ Hochschild 2016.

In Chapter Two, we discuss the methodology of our research, narrate how we came into contact with disinformation architects, and state the questions that drove our interviews and participant observation.

Chapter Three is the first data section and pertains to the work hierarchies of disinformation architects. Following a production studies approach, which aims to explore from the bottom-up workers' "creativity within constraints" in media production processes,⁴² we aim to narrate ethnographic "portraits" of people we met to gain understanding of their complex social positionings and how their identities impact the content they produce.

Chapter Four is the second main data section and discusses networked disinformation production and their social outcomes in online discussion and mobilization. This section builds on theoretical insight from political communication work that explains how digital campaigning engenders grassroots political participation.⁴³ We break down the production process of networked disinformation campaigns, describing how disinformation architects act as crucial intermediaries of political marketing who aim to manipulate and mobilize populist sentiments to favor their political clients. This section also draws inspiration from media studies work on mediatized populism, which discusses how populist political style is expressed in online speech,⁴⁴ and digital disinformation, which has previously discussed the formation of unholy alliances among right-wing interest groups that aim to hijack mainstream media agenda through techniques of "attention-hacking".⁴⁵ We add to this line of work by paying attention to why disinformation architects in the Philippines turn to populist speech styles in weaponizing social media for political deception.

⁴² Mayer, Caldwell, and Banks 2009.

⁴³ Penney 2017.

⁴⁴ Bulut and Yoruk 2017.

⁴⁵ Marwick and Lewis 2017.

Box Text 1. A Brief Overview of Philippine Politics

The structure of Philippine governance is modeled after that of the USA, with its roots in the country's American colonial period (1898-1946). It follows the presidential system as well as the tripartite division of the executive, the bicameral legislative, and the judiciary branches. However, it does have key differences with the US system. For instance, there is a strong centralisation of power on the president, who is elected via popular votes and separately from the vice-president.⁴⁶

Philippine politics is shaped by a culture of patronage between an oligarchic elite and supporters who establish relationships of dependency and obligation with them. Growing out of a system of patron-client relations established during the Spanish colonial period (1521-1898), the country's powerful political families and personalities have continued to cultivate clientelistic relationships with their loyal followers.⁴⁷ Consequently, national politics in the Philippines is characterized by weak political party ideologists and affiliations that are completely overwhelmed by strong personalistic relationships with presidential contenders who are perceived to possess the right image branding.⁴⁸

This right image branding is highly contextual and depends on an existing regime's popularity or unpopularity. A new president often crafts his/her image in a bid to innovate on, preempt, repudiate or reconstruct the image of the preceding regime.⁴⁹ From this perspective, Duterte's case can be understood as an image branding premised on a repudiation of an existing regime. Indeed, his mantra for both in his electoral campaign and his current administration has been "change is coming". This is a promise to offer something different from what critics describe as the bureaucratic inefficiency and weak political will of the Aquino administration, which they claim suffered from constant "analysis paralysis".⁵⁰

⁴⁶ McCoy 1989; Sidel 1999.

⁴⁷ Hedman and Sidel 2000.

⁴⁸ Bionat 1998; Coronel et al. 2004.

⁴⁹ Teehankee 2016.

⁵⁰ Singh and Cook 2017.

Chapter 2

Research Methods

From December 2016 to December 2017, we conducted in-depth interviews with twenty (20) disinformation architects at both managerial and staff level, as well as conducted participant observation of Facebook community groups and Twitter accounts used by our informants. We began by reaching out to personal contacts in the ad industry whom we know to have worked in political campaigns for the Philippine elections in May 2016. We explained to them our research interest in digital labor, particularly in the procedures and structures of digital political operations work. From our initial interviews with managerial-level political operators, we used snowball sampling and were introduced by managers to the lower-level staff they worked with in digital campaigns.

Interviews

Table 1 presents the different categories of operators we interviewed and their roles in digital political campaigns. A digital campaign team is often headed by a senior strategist with a background in advertising and PR industry. Based on the campaign objective of their political client, the strategist then assembles a team of digital influencers and fake account operators to operationalize the objectives set out in the communications plan. We discuss their work structure and social backgrounds in greater depth in the next chapter.

Table 1. Respondent list (Total count: 20)

| Category | Count | Roles | Professional Backgrounds |
|--|-------|--|--|
| Elite advertising and PR strategists as Chief Disinformation Architects | 6 | Manages the entire campaign project and budget; authors communication plan; hires influencers and fake account operators; operates several fake accounts themselves; reports directly to politician | Main job at present: Ad and PR account director or creative director usually in a “boutique” agency; social media consultant Prior roles: broadcast or newspaper journalist |
| Aspirational middle-class digital workers as Anonymous Digital Influencers | 5 | Operators of one or more anonymous accounts that command >50,000 followers across Twitter and Facebook; subcontracted by ad and PR strategists; often paid based on reach and engagement they produce for a campaign | Main job at present: computer programmer; search engine optimization specialist online freelance worker Prior roles: broadcast or newspaper journalist, marketing and finance staff; call center employee |
| Precarious middle-class workers as Community-level Fake Account Operators | 9 | Subcontracted by ad and PR strategists or politicians’ chief of staff; assigned to amplify influencers’ messages by reposting and retweeting, thus creating “illusions of engagement” | Main job at present: government staff; social media content producer; online freelance worker Prior jobs: call center employees; recent graduate |

Table 2. Respondents' demographic profile (Total count: 20)

| | | Count |
|-----|--------------|-------|
| Age | 25 and below | 9 |
| | 26 to 40 | 5 |
| | 40 and up | 6 |
| Sex | Male | 9 |
| | Female | 11 |

The professional backgrounds of chief disinformation architects say a lot about the roots of digital political operations in the ad and PR industry. These strategists maintain day jobs as accounts or creative directors of what are known in the industry as “boutique agencies”—local (rather than multinational) ad and PR firms. They apply their expertise in social media content management to household brands as well as political clients.

Chief architects work closely with anonymous digital influencers who each maintain multiple social media accounts with 50,000 to 2,000,000 followers. These popular pages carry distinctive branding and post regular updates of humorous, inspirational, or pop culture/celebrity-oriented content. During campaign periods, these pages are “activated” to promote hashtags and memes favorable to their clients who are often corporate brands or celebrities but occasionally political clients. Page owners remain anonymous to their followers, and there is no disclosure of paid content to their followers. These anonymous digital influencers maintain day jobs as computer programmers, search engine optimization specialists, or marketing and finance staff.

Meanwhile, there are also those whom we call community-level fake account operators because of how they infiltrate existing online communities and engage with real grassroots supporters. These online communities include politicians' fan groups, Philippines-related news pages, or pages dedicated to discussing local politics of certain towns or municipalities. These operators are usually fresh college graduates, politicians' administrative staff, and online freelance workers who juggle various clients commissioning piecemeal digital work. We learned that many of these operators are based in provinces outside Metro Manila.

Before each interview, we briefed our informants that our approach was empathetic. We do not intend to cast moral judgments on the participants' actions nor play at investigative journalism to “expose” troll account operations and name and shame specific politicians involved in these. For instance, writers of different news agencies⁵¹ have published pieces and investigative reports aimed at “unmask[ing] the trolls” and give an insider view of their operations. While the reports are important in providing evidence of such work, the “unmasked” troll operators were attacked, shamed, and harassed on social media—which we think are counterproductive to critically understanding the digital underground and its interrelationship with mainstream culture in professional practice.⁵² Conscious of the sensitive nature of labels such as “troll” especially in our initial recruitment of participants, we thus only used words such as “trolling”, “fake accounts”, and “fake news” after respondents themselves used these terms in the course of an interview, and only once we had established sufficient rapport with them.⁵³

One ethnographic surprise from our interviews was discovering that many fake account operators and anonymous digital influencers are gay and transgender people. We learned from informal chats with them how they switch between “male” and “female” voices when operating their multiple fake accounts, and how they use snarky Filipino gay humor to poke fun at their online rivals. Strategically using affordances for anonymity in social media, they make use of their skills in “gender code-switching” to effectively deploy the appropriate digital persona to suit objectives of a campaign. While some gay and transgender people we met refused to be formally interviewed, presumably to avoid risk of their identities being “exposed”, we gained some insight into the specific conditions of “purple collar labor”⁵⁴ as it applies to the digital disinformation industry. Gay and transgender people are often assumed as having mastery of the latest pop culture references, exuberant image management skills (i.e., from their dating profiles to message board memberships), and fan mobilization discipline (i.e., from systematic coordination to support Filipina contenders in annual Miss Universe online voting) that guarantee vivaciousness and “spirit” to the social media accounts and campaigns they handle.

⁵¹ For investigative and op-ed piece on “confessions” of paid trolls, see Business Mirror 2016, Caruncho 2016, and Hofileña 2016. We are also conscious of risks in inadvertent exposure of anonymous political posters online. There are cases of anonymous bloggers and authors being harassed to the point of being forced to reveal themselves.

⁵² Almario-Gonzalez 2017.

⁵³ We are aware that the terms “troll” and “fake news” come with a very heavy baggage, and their uses are political particularly in how they can delegitimize particular speech acts or individuals, i.e., see Tambini 2016. In this report, our use of the term “troll” references the popular Filipino discourse which imagines political supporters as an angry, even brainwashed, mob who bully dissenters or opponents who are now newly emboldened in the use of offensive and incivil speech from leaders like Duterte. Our own position here on the discourse of the troll is actually inspired by Whitney Phillips, who sees troll culture and practice as an extension of mainstream culture rather than as a new or separate entity or practice. See Phillips 2015.

⁵⁴ This brings to mind Emmanuel David's work on the common practice of “gender-code-switching” among transgender call center workers in the Philippines who strategically switch between masculine and feminine personas when responding to client demands and frustrations, see David 2015, 144.

Online Participant Observation

We supplemented our interviews with participant observation of online communities. We observed over 20 publicly accessible Facebook groups and pages and Twitter accounts supporting various political players at both national and local levels. In the interest of fairness and objectivity, we made sure to include explicitly pro- and anti-Duterte groups, as well as pages without explicit representation of candidates or political parties, but who claim to curate “social media news”.

Through participant observation, we examined the content and visual aesthetics of posts crafted by influencers, and followed their digital trail across platforms. We observed the tone and speech styles of replies and comments to the original posts. This allowed us to better understand how networked disinformation campaigns were translated into specific posts or memes. During our fieldwork, some participants showed us fake accounts they operated and even shared their passwords to these accounts. This provided us an added opportunity to compare and contrast what our participants said in the context of the interview with what they actually did in the online profiles they created,⁵⁵ as we were able to check on the digital traces they left in their Facebook histories.

Ethics

Following the protocols of university research ethics, we told our informants that we would dis-identify information that could be traced to individuals. This is why in the data sections of this report, we have intentionally obscured some details of the networked disinformation campaigns that our participants wanted to keep confidential.

⁵⁵ Jerolmack and Khan 2014.

Chapter 3

The Disinformation Interface: Work Hierarchies and Competitive Collegialities of Disinformation Architects

This chapter sketches out the different motivations and aspirations of the architects of networked disinformation. Previous research on political trolling and fake news production has shed light on how disinformation is usually produced out of the “unholy alliances” formed by lobby groups and media companies in the US pushing far-right ideology,⁵⁶ but are in some cases authored by teenagers in Macedonia with purely financial motivations.⁵⁷ Indeed, as Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan have discussed, “agents of information disorder” have diverse backgrounds, and it is important to carefully tease out their level of organization, motivations (financial, political, social, psychological), and intentions (whether to mislead, harm, or otherwise).⁵⁸ In this particular section, we argue that we cannot always generalize motivations and intentions of disinformation architects, even within a single political campaign in one country. Networked disinformation, as with media production, involves diverse workers being “creative within constraints”⁵⁹ and are organized into hierarchies, which often lead to unpredictability in campaign outcomes.

We found that the architecture of networked disinformation in the Philippines involves diverse and loosely interconnected groups of hierarchized digital workers with varied social backgrounds and distinct work responsibilities. *[See PAGE 9 in Executive Summary for the infographic illustrating the Architecture of Networked Disinformation].*

⁵⁶ Marwick and Lewis 2017.

⁵⁷ Silverman and Alexander 2016.

⁵⁸ Wardle and Derakhshan 2017.

⁵⁹ Mayer, Caldwell and Banks 2015.

We observed that chief architects of disinformation play leadership roles in the ad and PR industry and are thus socialized into professional “promotional cultures”.⁶⁰ Situated below them on the hierarchy are typically freelance digital workers, who harness their astute knowledge of social media infrastructures and pop culture vernaculars when crafting campaign messages to achieve emotional resonance with populist publics. While logics of promotional industries govern the strategy of digital political campaigns, the execution of these is highly volatile. Their diverse identities and often ironic moralities lead to creative, sometimes “messy” translations of campaign objectives that heighten risk for divisiveness in political discourse.

We narrate ethnographic “portraits” of each type of worker and identify their main work responsibilities as well as their social backgrounds. We end with a section that characterizes the interrelationships among different disinformation architects as one of “competitive collegialities”. In what immediately follows, we provide a literature review of academic debates on political marketing and digital disinformation.



⁶⁰ Promotional culture is defined by Andrew Wernick as the way in which promotional messages have become “co-extensive with our symbolic produced world... [such that] promotional culture has fully penetrated the domain of institutional politics, resulting in the explosion of slick election campaign advertising and the branding of politicians,” see Wernick 1991 in Penney 2017, 67. In Joel Penney’s account of *The Citizen Marketer*, he expounds on this idea and explains that “consumer-based economies that depend on the promotional industries for their very functioning (advertising, public relations, etc.), marketing becomes a kind of uberlogic that comes to pervade all social activities and institutions—even those that exist outside of the commercial marketplace”, see Penney 2017, 18.

Box Text 2. Networked Disinformation as Distributed Promotional Labor: An Academic Review

Digital political marketing, including the troll work of creating fake accounts and authoring “fake news,” represent the continuity of—rather than radical departure from—existing logics and processes of political marketing. Political marketing is an attempt to connect “distant high politics to the everyday”, as Maggie Scammell⁶¹ puts it. Behind this practice is the belief that ordinary citizens have the agency and ability to interpret or even reject persuasive marketing messages handed down from above by political elites. For Scammell, the “personalization of politics” today represents a shift toward a branding model, which emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between brands and publics that takes seriously their interests, needs, and emotional responses. Ordinary people are viewed here as having what John Corner and Dick Pels call “emotional literacies”⁶² and what Liesbet van Zoonen calls “affective intelligences”⁶³—specific rationalities that guide people’s engagement with the political sphere, which stem from personal experiences and cultural narratives they know, and crucially, feel. In Joel Penney’s account of *The Citizen Marketer*, the main objective then of contemporary political marketing is to develop a resonant brand image that will inspire supporters to do much of the promotional labor on their own at the grassroots level, rather than attempt to wholly direct this labor from the top down.⁶⁴ Promotional labor here not only includes activities of “rational” political persuasion in online discussion spaces, but also crucially involves “emotional” political fandom, such as in the performance of contagious enthusiasm where a political supporter “models an exuberance for others to follow”.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Scammell 2014.

⁶² Corner and Pels 2003.

⁶³ Van Zoonen 2005.

⁶⁴ Penney 2017, 107, emphasis in original.

⁶⁵ Penney 2017, 125.

The aim of architects of networked disinformation then is to ignite support at the grassroots level and harness the impassioned zeal of “real” political supporters to take on the work of persuasion in everyday spaces and rhythms of social media. But in order to achieve emotionally resonant messaging and authentic branding that would trigger grassroots support, chief disinformation architects need to collaborate with influencers much more fluent in popular vernaculars when planning creative executions of digital campaigns. Strategists and influencers then harness the support of both community-level fake account operators tasked to generate momentum and energy for a campaign and create “illusions of engagement”. Then, unpaid grassroots intermediaries and “real” supporters who operate like political fans amplify original campaign messages through shares and likes— but also take them forward in unpredictable ways.

Our study proposes the concept of the disinformation interface to capture this critical point of intersection between diverse and hierarchized professional disinformation architects and the actual “real” political supporters they attempt to inspire. Our use of interface, as developed from the writings of anthropologist Norman Long, emphasize the liminal nature of this space of interaction, which emphasizes discrepancies of interest and motivations across these groupings of disinformation producers. The idea of interface also gives emphasis on the porous boundaries between “paid”/“unpaid” or “worker”/“fan” in disinformation practice. As we will demonstrate, the project-based and casual nature of disinformation projects means that most disinformation architects can compartmentalize or “switch off” this type of work and assume more respectable personas derived from their primary or sideline jobs. Often, the sharing of political disinformation arises from the complicity of ordinary people who turn a blind eye to forms of deception that have grown to be normalized in mainstream culture.

⁶⁶ Long 2001.

Moral Justifications in the Disinformation Project

The common image of people involved in doing so-called “paid troll” work—as with most digital laborers in the global South—is that of the exploited worker in a “digital sweatshop” or a “click farm”. They are thought to spend their days executing monotonous and clerical tasks within highly regimented and exploitative arrangements. In the specific context of digital work for politics, Rongbin Han for instance narrates the precarious labor arrangements that buttress China’s “fifty-cent army”, the state-sponsored workers who are paid to act like “spontaneous grassroots support[ers]” in online discussion boards.⁶⁷ Following strict pay structures that emphasize quantity over quality of posts and often inflexible instructions in posting content, Han’s insightful research demonstrates how rigid work arrangements lead to failed outcomes in digital political operations. Han argues that citizens can actually easily identify posts authored by the “fifty-cent army” given how unnatural and unspontaneous their content reads.

In contrast to the Chinese case, what we find in the Philippines is that digital political operations are more diversified, with operators working with clients across the political spectrum and occupying a hierarchy of roles. Networked disinformation activities in the country follow the general structure of project-based digital work, which is characterized by workers on short-term contracts with their clients who measure the delivery of output by specific criteria and metrics. Project-based work emphasizes individualization and flexibility, where workers are expected to be entrepreneurial in establishing their value to their campaign and recognition in the field, demanding high personal commitment and resourcefulness in coping with precarious “race-to-the-bottom” work arrangements.⁶⁸ Project-based digital work often entails emotional labor, where workers are expected to manage their feelings in order to achieve client and public expectations, as well as work through moral dilemmas in their everyday routines. Casual workers sometimes deal with stressful, even traumatic work on their own in the absence of clear guidelines, psychosocial support systems, or remuneration.⁶⁹

As we illustrate in the following sections, disinformation architects engage in moral justifications that their work is not actually “trolling” or “fake news”. They employ various denial strategies that allow them to displace moral responsibility by citing that political consultancy is only one project (or “sideline”) that does not define their whole identity. The project-based nature of disinformation work makes moral displacement easier given the casual, short-term nature of the arrangement, which downplays commitment and responsibility to the broader sphere of political practice.

⁶⁷ Han 2015, 109.

⁶⁸ Graham et al. 2017; Ong and Combinido 2017; Qiu, Gregg and Crawford 2014.

⁶⁹ We are particularly guided by the writings of Arlie Hochschild, Melissa Gregg, and Emmanuel David on emotional labor, see Hochschild 2016, Gregg 2011, and David 2015.

Among all the workers we interviewed, nobody self-identified as a “troll” or producer of “fake news”; these labels are always projected upon either: 1) unnamed imagined supervillains with total political power, or 2) “real” supporters or political fans. People we interviewed all claimed that it is the “real” supporters with enthusiastic zeal and fan adoration for their candidate who are more likely to be invested in making personal attacks and hateful expressions in online arguments—not professional, project-based disinformation architects like themselves.

Moral justifications across the three levels of the networked disinformation hierarchy differ. At the top level, strategists are more likely to express discourses of gamification and fictionalization to justify their work. They draw from cultural scripts from Western entertainment (“It’s like being Olivia Pope of *Scandal*”) to video games (“It’s game over when you’re found out”) to fictionalize the dangerous consequences of their actions and block feelings of real involvement. They even express a certain thrill in breaking or rewriting the “rules of the game”, having already surpassed challenges of campaigning for corporate brands with tighter ethical guidelines. At the middle level, influencers are more likely to express discourses of normalization to justify disinformation production. They cite how *they do exactly the same work* to promote corporate brands and entertainment products, or even volunteer their digital expertise for free to support fandoms such as for celebrities or beauty pageant titlists. At the lowest level, community-level fake account operators have primarily financial or material reasons to justify their work and are often persuaded by others to take on added work for extra cash.

What is common among these moral justifications about trolling is how they are grounded in an *ethics of irony*, where values and “truths” become relative and self-centered;⁷⁰ the disinformation architect denies responsibility or commitment to the broader public by narrating a personal project of self-empowerment instead.

Chief Architects: Ad and PR Strategists

At the top level of networked disinformation campaigns are ad and PR executives who take on the role of high-level political operators. Usually they occupy leadership roles in “boutique agencies,” and handle a portfolio of corporate brands while maintaining consultancies with political clients on

⁷⁰ The writings of Lilie Chouliaraki on the ethics of irony as perpetuated by marketized logics of consumer marketing are especially helpful to think this through. See Chouliaraki 2013.

the side.⁷¹ They transpose tried-and-tested industry techniques of reputation-building and spin to networked disinformation campaigns. Many executives with a track record of achieving worldwide trending status for digital campaigns they launched for household brands, telcos, and celebrities saw political consultancy as a new challenge for them to apply their skills and leverage their networks.

The chief architects of networked disinformation we interviewed only handled digital political operations for their political clients, while more seasoned campaigners managed traditional media campaigning. They mentioned working with the traditional media campaigners to coordinate communication schedules, selecting the right key opinion leaders and celebrities to endorse their candidate, and paying out corrupt journalists to disseminate the core campaign messages they collaboratively work on.


Chief disinformation architects' main responsibility is to generate and inspire support through online engagement. To achieve this, they recruit a team of anonymous digital influencers and fake account operators to seed core campaign messages in online spaces and create "illusions of engagement" to inspire enthusiasm from real supporters.

While many chief architects are very savvy with digital technology, they are actually wary of emerging techniques in global disinformation campaigns such as using automated software like bots. They would much rather rely on the labor of savvy creative writers with knowledge of popular vernaculars who can mobilize populist public sentiment. As one chief architect remarked about bots, "Bots are like the white walkers in Game of Thrones. They're stupid and obvious and easily killed. They can't inspire engagement."

Chief architects nevertheless complained that they are occasionally undervalued by politicians and their primary handlers, who are more familiar with campaigning on traditional platforms and still value the prestige of landing press releases or sound bites in the top newspapers. Digital strategists make the most of this opportunity to establish themselves as the de facto pioneers in a platform that they know will come to dominate the future of political propaganda. As one strategist told us, "the Philippines does not realize that it is sitting on a stockpile of digital weapons." Her statement recognizes that Filipino digital workers as highly entrepreneurial and resourceful, whether they be

⁷¹ Many multinational ad agencies are said to follow head office protocols that forbid contracts with political clients, while others are more lenient and permit this practice. It is an industry "open secret" that boutique PR agencies earn a lot from political consultancies and "black ops" crisis management including for corporate brands. Industry insiders we met referred to such consultants as "cleaning ladies"—a pejorative term for colleagues who seek to profit from doing the dirty work of cleaning up corporate and political mess.

the computer hackers who coded the infamous Y2K virus or the freelance workers who diligently work with a global clientele on digital platforms.

Chief architects also see networked disinformation as an opportunity to disrupt existing social hierarchies and challenge established power players in political marketing. As Rachel, a young strategist shared, “I’d actually like to phase out our company practice of paying out journalists to seed or delete news because they can be entitled or unscrupulous. The reason why I’m more passionate and committed about online work is because I don’t like the politics in journalism.” In this quote, it is interesting how corruption in mainstream media is used as a moral justification to dispose of institutionalized practice by replacing it with another version—equally lacking in scruples, and ultimately benefiting themselves. By expressing statements that normalize or even exaggerate evil or corruption in existing public institutions, these ambitious workers imagine themselves as self-styled agents of positive change. 

Box Text 3.

Portrait of a Chief Architect

Dom, in her 40s, made her name in the industry as a seasoned creative director for a multinational ad agency in the Philippines. She has a reputation as a firebrand with a boisterous personality and the amazing skill of coming up with clever corporate taglines. She is resourceful with her “rakets” (sideline jobs), as she is the family breadwinner.

Her most lucrative sideline is advising politicians every three years during election season. She has handled presidential candidates. She describes her work as a political consultant as a more thrilling and challenging version of her everyday work handling corporate brands. She uses the same buzzwords from her industry (“brand book”, “brand identity”) even when talking about the unscrupulous politicians she has worked for.

In our interview, Dom drew parallels of “sweat labor” in advertising firms with sweat labor in digital political operations. She says: “The only difference is that you’re a high-class prostitute in advertising, but in political marketing you’re a low-class prostitute”.

Nevertheless she tries to distance herself from the grimmest aspects of her work when she says, “80% of myself is this job. But this is not my soul and this is not me. That’s why I want that 20 percent for my own sanity. Because, come on, if I don’t take the 80 percent, how will I eat? How can I afford this [house]? No... Really, I am being very honest. I need to have a purpose in what I do. That’s why I’m carving out that 20 percent to pursue my passion, which is a risk on my end because that’s how it is [ganun ’yun eh]. You wanna do something right, risk your money, risk your time, your effort, your devotion, your effort, your heart.”

In this quote, she adopts a confessional tone, as if asking for absolution from us in the retelling of her life choices and compromises.

In other parts of the interview she takes on a more ironic tone when describing her job. She drew comparisons to Olivia Pope of the American television drama *Scandal*, who is a crisis consultant prone to moral compromises but ultimately has a redemptive arc to her dramatic narrative.

It is evident that she also relishes the thrill and adrenaline rush she gets from the job. She was most excitable but also playfully coy when talking about the hacking and coding skills of members in her team. At one point she said, “Maybe if I had this power 10 years ago, I would have abused it and I could toy with you guys [kung ano-ano gagawin ko sa inyo]. But now I’m in my 40s, it’s a good thing I have a little maturity on how to use it. But what I’m really saying is we can fuck your digital life without you even knowing about it.”

In that moment, we shuddered to imagine the fates of the poor powerless folks who had crossed this woman.

Anonymous Digital Influencers and Key Opinion Leaders

At the mid-level of the hierarchy of networked disinformation are digital influencers. Here it is important to distinguish between key opinion leaders such as celebrities and political pundits who maintain high profile and boisterous public personas (e.g., Mocha Uson or Ethel Booba), versus anonymous micro-influencers who execute more clandestine political operations. In our research, we focused on the anonymous digital influencers who usually operate one or more anonymous accounts (think: comedy or inspirational pages on Twitter and Facebook) that entertain their followers with their specific brand of hilarity or commentary while occasionally slipping in paid content into their feed. These influencers harness their astute understanding of the public's pop culture tastes, political sentiments, and social media behaviors to become expert attention-hackers.

Anonymous digital influencers expect their followers of between 50,000 to 2,000,000 to share and like their messages with the aim of gaming Twitter trending rankings, and create viral posts on Facebook so as to influence mainstream media coverage.⁷² Translating the campaign plans of the ad and PR strategists into shareable content, they use snark, humor or inspirational messaging consistent with the social media personas they operate to post content that is favorable or unfavorable to particular politicians, often anchored by a hashtag agreed upon between them and the chief architects.

A few anonymous digital influencers take on the role of being second-level subcontractors. As sub-subcontractors, they work as intermediaries between chief architects and their fellow anonymous influencers to whom they delegate disinformation work.

All the anonymous influencers we met take on this role on a part-time, per-project basis, as many of them have day jobs in IT, corporate marketing, and other sideline work such as online community management for celebrities' fan clubs. This kind of work has the trappings of the precarious and aspirational middle-class lifestyle common to most kinds of freelance digital work in the Philippines.⁷³ Anonymous influencers deeply enjoy being in an aspirational work environment. They recall with pride how they do disinformation work while booked overnight in a five-star hotel suite or in a mansion in a gated village. They also get excited by the material and symbolic rewards that chief architects promise to the best performing digital worker in the team, such as the latest iPhone model

⁷² The aim to break into mainstream media coverage is similar with the attention-hackers described by Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis in the US context, see the Data and Society report by Marwick and Lewis 2016. However the intention behind this is not ideological but driven primarily by the impassioned zeal of fans supporting their much admired political personality. This is reflective of the personality-based political system in the Philippines with a weak party system that has little differentiation in ideology and policy, see Hutchcroft 1991.

⁷³ David 2015; Fabros 2016; Graham et al 2017

or a meet-and-greet with a top-level celebrity managed by their boutique PR agency.

As part of the precarious and entrepreneurial middle class, anonymous digital influencers are driven by economic opportunities to take on disinformation work. They have previously endured less stable, less financially and socially rewarding jobs in the creative industries and see influencer work as giving them more freedom, especially to choose clients. Curiously, we found that there is usually an alignment between digital influencers and the political clients they serve: not in terms of ideology or issues, but in terms of fan admiration. Some influencers hired by political clients they do not like would subcontract work to a fellow influencer they know who is a “real fan” of that politician.

While scholars in the Philippines continue to debunk discourses of bobotante (“stupid voters”) and argue that poor people have different rationales for selling their votes, hence have a “negotiate[d] support” to politicians,⁷⁴ we found out that paid influencers and even community-level fake account operators have similar internalizations as well, which reflect in their work output. For instance, in the portrait below, influencer Georgina observes that in the pool of anonymous influencers she manages during campaigns, those that wholeheartedly support the candidate are the most hardworking. “Real fans” are motivated to come up with 30 to 50 posts a day compared to non-supporters who only do five posts.

Box Text 4. Portrait of an Anonymous Influencer

28 year-old Georgina is a transgender digital marketer with a computer engineering degree from one of the leading national universities. She remembers getting her start in digital marketing work after being rejected many times over when interviewing for jobs directly related to her degree. With her long black hair, short-sleeved shirts, and soft-spoken tone, she felt she was never given a fair shot by interviewers in a male-dominated field, who were

⁷⁴ See the news article published by Nakpil 2016 about a forum where academics discussed and debunked the idea that Duterte supporters are “fanatics”.

quick to assume she's too *maarte* [fussy] to build or maintain computer hardware. She told us how she had to be especially resourceful in finding work and trying out specialized digital boutiques to find a stable source of income that could support her family, as well as her save up for her own transition and reassignment procedures.

One digital marketing boutique she worked for specialized in search engine optimization, helping clients improve their Google Page Rank. During the interview, she narrated how their marketing portfolio included nefarious techniques of using fake and clickbait headlines and websites to drive web traffic to their corporate clients. The nonchalance with which she narrated this seemed to suggest that such practices are never regarded with shame or regret in her workplace, but are viewed instead as enterprising or innovative.

An early adopter of new technology, she claimed she has always been fascinated by new financial opportunities offered by digital platforms. When she grew in understanding of the influencer industry a few years ago, she created what is popularly called a “quote account” on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram and steadily grew its followers seeking daily inspiration from its feed of bland feel-good positivity quotes and memes. Eventually, she was hired to promote campaigns for local telcos, then celebrities and their movies, then political clients. She volunteers her powers of noise creation and “signal scrambling” for people and causes she believes in, such as promoting her favorite celebrity crushes or making sure Miss Philippines dominates social media conversations in the lead-up to the annual Miss Universe pageant. The key task of anonymous influencer accounts, as with regular influencer accounts, is to achieve authenticity: “Sometimes clients insist on being explicit with branding or hashtags, but that’s how you lose followers—when you become labeled as *bayaran* [paid stooge]”.

Georgina enjoys relative privilege as the right-hand woman of a chief disinformation architect. This means that after a campaign briefing, it becomes her responsibility to assemble and manage the team of anonymous influencers—people with whom she maintains relationships of “competitive collegialities” (to be explained in a later section). Georgina introduced us during fieldwork to other “trans trolls” who use lifelong skills of gender code-switching to deploy the right personas and hit the right notes when broadcasting deceptive messages in, quite paradoxically, the most authentic way possible.

Community-level Fake Account Operators

At the lowest level of the networked disinformation hierarchy are community-level fake account operators. These workers are tasked to follow what we call script-based disinformation work, which consists of posting written and/or visual content previously designed by the strategists on a predetermined schedule, as well as affirming and amplifying key messages by strategists and influencers through likes and shares, thus creating “illusions of engagement”. Community-level fake account operators are tasked to post a prescribed number of posts or comments on Facebook community groups,⁷⁵ news sites, or rival politicians’ pages per day. By actively posting content from generic greetings to political messages within Facebook community groups, they are often responsible for maintaining activity and initiating bandwagon effects that would drive real grassroots supporters to come out and openly express their enthusiasm for a particular politician.

They usually post positive messages of support for the politician and agree publicly with to favorable news articles. But other times, they can initiate quarrels with supporters of rival politicians. They use ad hominem attacks or make fun of other people’s bad grammar as a way of shutting down an opponent’s argument. They mention that their ultimate failure as fake account operators on Facebook is when they are called out as a fake account (“That’s game over! That usually shuts us up”).

There are different labor arrangements for this kind of low-level troll work. Most of the respondents in our study were fake account operators working within politicians’ own administrative staff. These are usually junior-level employees tasked to “help” with a political campaign, and they usually begrudge the fact that there is no additional pay for this kind of publicly derided work they did not originally sign up for. Other fake account operators whom we have yet to formally interview face-to-face are freelancers who are paid on a per-day basis upon achieving a set number of posts or comments, and office-based fake account operators who work in a “call-center” kind of arrangement, some of whom operate in provinces that are bailiwicks of politicians.

Community-level fake account operators’ motivation is primarily financial. We found out that some of their fake accounts on Facebook or Twitter had prior histories before their political trolling work, used as part of pyramid marketing schemes. These “networking” schemes required them to visually display groups of friends; fake accounts were one way to artificially manufacture group support.

⁷⁵ Anthropologists call these modes of exchange as “phatic communication” where what is important is not the content of what is being said but the ritual of affirming and maintaining social bonds through routine communicative exchange. See the work of Malinowski 1993.

Many fake account operators appear to be workers who have previously tried out many other risky enterprises as a means to achieve financial stability. While in many cases fake account operators collude with people or groups who offer financial rewards in exchange for accomplishing morally sketchy tasks, subtle forms of resistance can also emerge, as narrated in the box text below.

Box Text 5. Portrait of a Reluctant Troll

Risa admitted to us that she operated fake accounts on Facebook in the run-up to the May 2016 national elections. Reporting to a very domineering, take-no-prisoners Chief of Staff of a fledgling mayoral candidate in one of the largest cities in Metro Manila, Risa and her cohort of fresh college graduates couldn't but agree to doing the shameful work of creating fake accounts and trolling Facebook community pages. What's worse is that this was additional work, without additional pay. In election season after all, taking on additional work showed *pakikisama* [getting along with others] and *utang na loob* [fulfilling debt obligations], especially for young people who were fresh out of college.

Following the example of the Chief of Staff who maintained two fake accounts herself, Risa and her colleagues came up with fake profiles and populated a Facebook group dedicated to the city they were trying to win. Some staff members were bold enough to even troll the opposing candidate's Facebook page with a witty hashtag that exaggerated his ineptitude in managing the city's disaster response program.

Risa was different. It was very obvious that her heart and spirit were broken by this kind of work. Idealistic and fiercely intelligent, Risa was actually the top student of one of the most competitive programs in a leading national university; she had hoped this job would lead toward glowing recommendation letters to get her into law school. She didn't admit it, but it seemed quite probable that she intentionally sabotaged her own fake account. She had

only become Facebook friends with 20 people, unlike her other colleagues who maintained “bikini troll” accounts that lured 500 new friends with overtly sexual profile pictures.

Unlike her colleagues, Risa never spoke about the “thrill” of creating viral memes. The discomfort was evident in her body language during the interview: her narration was slow and stilted, as if the words brought her physical pain the moment they had left her body.

Risa survived those difficult months through humorous banter with her colleagues. They poked fun at the Chief of Staff by calling her “Madam” behind her back and described the whole experience as an adventure. “It was like a roller coaster ride I didn’t sign up for!”, she said. What got her through was the assurance the gig was all temporary: she had tendered her resignation letter to “Madam” three months before the elections and was counting down to her last day at work. She was so done.

Competitive Collegialities

We use the concept of competitive collegialities to describe the complicated nature of the work relationships among disinformation architects at different levels of the hierarchy. The different disinformation producers find themselves compelled to work together even if their professional aspirations are ultimately at odds with each other: while chief disinformation architects want to maintain the work hierarchy they established, lower-level political operators aim to overcome the power asymmetries.

In some key ways, this kind of relationship follows broader dynamics of work relationships in the creative industries. Those in the higher rungs of these industries are keen to maintain power and status hierarchies within their organisations. But at the same time, they establish incentives that encourage those at the lower rungs to aspire for upward mobility at all costs, even by self-exploitation.⁷⁶ This desire for upward mobility is especially resonant with the Philippines’ digital freelance workforce. Key to this is the overly optimistic line that the country’s government officials and digital freelance gurus

⁷⁶ See Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011.

promote, as they celebrate the achievements of this “sunshine” digital industry in lifting individuals into the middle class.⁷⁷ That said, precarious digital workers also find diverse psycho-social rewards from the work they do and friendships they develop with their colleagues.⁷⁸

The Need for Collegiality

Chief architects of networked disinformation require the promotional labor of digital influencers who are more fluent with popular vernaculars and are able to weaponize these into effective social media posts that can mobilize public sentiment. Conversely, influencers and fake account operators also need the chief architects to broker projects and consultancies for them, whether digital disinformation or other kinds of digital work. Strategists are the indispensable link between political clients who wish to mobilize click armies and the influencers and operators who want to monetize their legions of followers. Since the strategists’ client portfolio often comprises not just only politicians, but also commercial clients and celebrities, influencers and fake account operators need them to access a wide variety of projects and sources of income.

The anonymous influencer Georgina, for instance, said that she got most of her “sideline” work from the PR strategist Kimberly. Because Kimberly had been crucial to many of Georgina’s freelance opportunities, Georgina found it important to maintain very good professional relations with her—even if she imagined herself as possibly competing with her in the future. “My goal is to become a strategist too,” Georgina shared with us. “I want to eventually interface with clients directly and lead teams on projects, because that’s pretty much what I have been doing when working with other influencers. I guess I’ll do this when I learn more about communications planning.”

Digital influencers and fake account operators need the seasoned digital strategists to lend their work an aura of professionalism and, consequently, legitimacy. Indeed, the strategists do the crucial work of interfacing with clients who do not necessarily wish to know all the lurid details behind the viral hashtag campaigns they had paid for. From their leadership positions in the prestigious advertising and PR industry, strategists in effect legitimize digital disinformation projects for both political clients and their team of digital workers. Strategists repackage the populist strategies of weaponizing popular vernaculars by using the professionalized jargon of the promotional industries. Corporate marketing terms such as “velocity”, “influencer collaboration”, and “message scheduling” in effect neutralize the stigma surrounding political campaign strategies of “mobilizing click armies” and “hiring paid trolls”.

⁷⁷ Abara and Heo 2013; Beerepoot and Hendriks 2013; Mann and Graham 2016.

⁷⁸ David 2015; Fabros 2016.

As a case in point, PR strategist Kimberly explained that to win an account with potential political clients, she would parade her track record of successful promotional campaigns with big commercial brands and local and Hollywood celebrities. She would always use “professional jargon” when labeling digital influencers and community-level fake account operators with the blandly generic term “digital support workers”. She would justify to clients how “digital support workers” are similarly used by brands and celebrities to achieve top trending hashtags.

The Inevitability of Competition

To entice digital influencers to collaborate with them in executing disinformation campaigns, the chief architects of networked disinformation construct an aspirational imaginary about their line of work.⁷⁹ High-level strategists do this both through material and symbolic means, promising influencers expensive gadgets and organizing photo-ops with their own celebrity clients to further enhance influencers’ fame and status.

To motivate digital influencers to consistently design the most effective disinformation content, the high-level strategists remunerate them using a competitively tiered salary mechanism, which follows existing conventions of corporate marketing contracts. Influencers hired for the same project are paid differently based on their engagement rates; those who garner the highest number of likes and retweets are paid higher than the others. This pushes the influencers to compete and outdo each other in crafting viral messages, upping the ante in their use of populist vernaculars. Their weapons of choice: conjuring an enemy, invoking a state of crisis, and deploying incivil language for “shock effect.”

They may entice digital influencers to aspire for this line of work, but strategists simultaneously put in place mechanisms that enforce existing power hierarchies. Strategists claimed that they shuffled the rules of engagement every year, to keep influencers constantly playing catch-up to developments in the field. Amongst other things, they would change salary schemes, disinformation design strategies, and team compositions. They were also careful to guard their knowledge of the field and keep their key contacts in industry and politics close to their chest.

Competitive collegialities of disinformation work have led to very complicated relationships amongst the different workers. A number of them see each other as colleagues who have to work together on

⁷⁹ For a thorough description of the commercial structure of the digital influencer industry, See Abidin 2016.

projects and, sometimes even become friends. We met a small group of transgenders who operate over a dozen anonymous digital influencer accounts between them. They help each other professionally through client referrals, and provide emotional support for each other's personal challenges and journeys of gender transition.

However, most disinformation workers treat each other as competitors who need to edge each other out. It has become common for digital influencers to hack and steal each other's Twitter and Facebook accounts, or the accounts of high-level political strategists in a bid to displace them. Accounts with huge followings are the biggest targets as these can net higher remuneration for campaigns.

These dynamics lend a "Wild West" and "easy come, easy go" character to the work of networked disinformation. Indeed, the relationships amongst the digital political operators mirror a more general trend in the online freelance promotional industry, where there is a constant game of one-upmanship brought about by the sheer proliferation of influencers.⁸⁰

One major consequence of competitive collegialities has been the displacement of responsibility for the outcomes of networked disinformation. Most workers in the disinformation architecture are focused on staying ahead (for the strategists) or, more desperately, getting ahead (for the influencers and the community-level fake account operators) in the field of disinformation, and more broadly, in the promotional industries. As such, no one wants to address or assume accountability for the vitriol, misogyny, and racism, amongst other things, that emerge in the aftermath of many networked disinformation campaigns. None of them is interested in self-regulation.

In our interviews with the different disinformation architects, we asked them who they thought was ultimately responsible for producing disinformation and fake news. Each of them responded by passing on responsibility to someone else, perpetually displacing accountability. The high-level strategists say that they never peddle outright lies, only fudged half-truths. Digital influencers say that coming up with actual fake news and disinformation content is produced by unnamed others in the disinformation architecture, or by "real supporters" from the grassroots. In many ways, this is all goes back to how the work of networked disinformation is not bound by established professional relations and ethics, nor by a sense of care and concern for the democratic freedom of speech that they often end up undermining.



⁸⁰ For a fuller discussion of the "Wild West" character of the online freelance industry, see Keen 2007.



Chapter 4

Fake News in the Making: Principles and Practices of Networked Disinformation Production

The architecture of networked disinformation can be described as a democratized but hierarchized network of loose relations amongst the producers of digital disinformation campaigns. As we discussed in the previous section, these producers come from different backgrounds, with diverse motivations and ironic moralities, which result in complicated relationships with each other.

To better understand the production dynamics that govern such a network of operators, we identify the tension at the heart of crafting networked disinformation, which is between the promotional communication principles of 1) **controlled interactivity** and 2) **volatile virality**. We show how this tension animates both the 1) **design** and 2) **implementation** phases of disinformation campaigns. We also point out the consequences of this tension on the proliferation of information pollution and the ossification of filter bubbles in the Philippines' online political discussion spaces.

Defining Controlled Interactivity and Volatile Virality

In discussing the production of networked disinformation, we look at how the collaborative work of the different disinformation architects results in a process torn between competing principles of promotional communication (see Figure 2). We flesh out the anatomy of this production process, identifying the key stages and techniques that comprise it. We also shed light on the fine line that separates production from what Joel Penney describes as the eventual “viral” take-up and further amplification of such forms of political marketing by grassroots intermediaries.⁸¹ In so doing, we contribute to a fuller account of the dynamics that operate within and around the disinformation interface between political campaign producers and real supporters.

One of the promotional communication principles that are at play in the production of networked disinformation is controlled interactivity: the maintenance of message discipline throughout the digital political campaign process. As Jennifer Stromer-Galley puts it, controlled interactivity is a digital two-step flow model of influence where political campaigners aim to disseminate a common script by carefully and strategically putting enthusiastic supporters to work as peer-to-peer conduits for organizational messages.⁸² The clearest expression of this principle can be found in the disinformation design techniques used by the chief architects of networked disinformation, which are rooted in tried-and-tested professional practices such as establishing key campaign objectives and using brand bibles.

The other principle of promotional communication at play is what we call **volatile virality**: trading “message discipline” in digital media campaigns for message popularity with all its unpredictable social consequences. Widening the reach of a campaign message takes precedence over the distortions and

⁸¹ Penney 2017.

⁸² Stromer-Galley 2014.

mistranslations by a campaign's grassroots intermediaries and enthusiastic real supporters. This principle is most evident in the disinformation translation and implementation techniques deployed by digital influencers and community-level account operators, which are driven by individual operators' attempts to weaponize popular vernaculars to maximize the reach of social media posts.

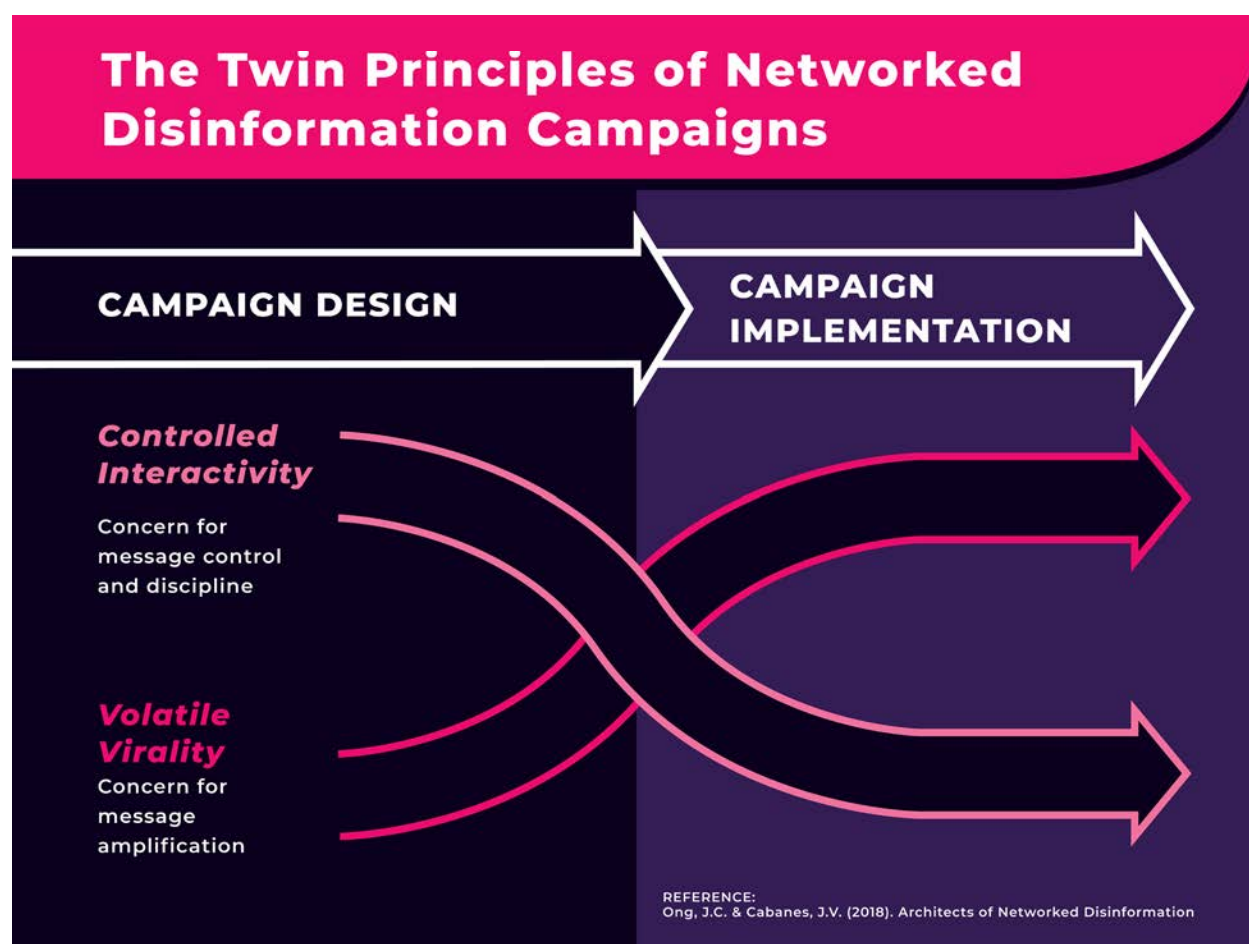


Figure 2. The twin principles of networked disinformation

Below we plot out how the tension between controlled interactivity and volatile virality shape the stages and techniques of networked disinformation production. We show the emergence of a fractured production process, with campaign design determined by ad and PR principles of strategic communication and with campaign translation and implementation influenced by the race to ride the highly volatile currents of populist sentiment.

The Stages and Techniques of Networked Disinformation Production

The disinformation architects say that the stages of networked disinformation production closely resemble the structure of the ad and PR communications plan: establishing campaign objectives, mapping out audience touch points, and identifying the roles that different media platforms play in translating and meeting the specific aims of a campaign (see Figure 3).⁸³ We contend, however, that what makes networked disinformation production much more pernicious is that the competing promotional communication principles that drive it have important consequences for the fragile health of transitional democracies like that of the Philippines. This is a theme we return to later on. Here what we would like to do is show how the stages of this particular production are shaped either by the predominance of the principle of controlled interactivity or volatile virality.

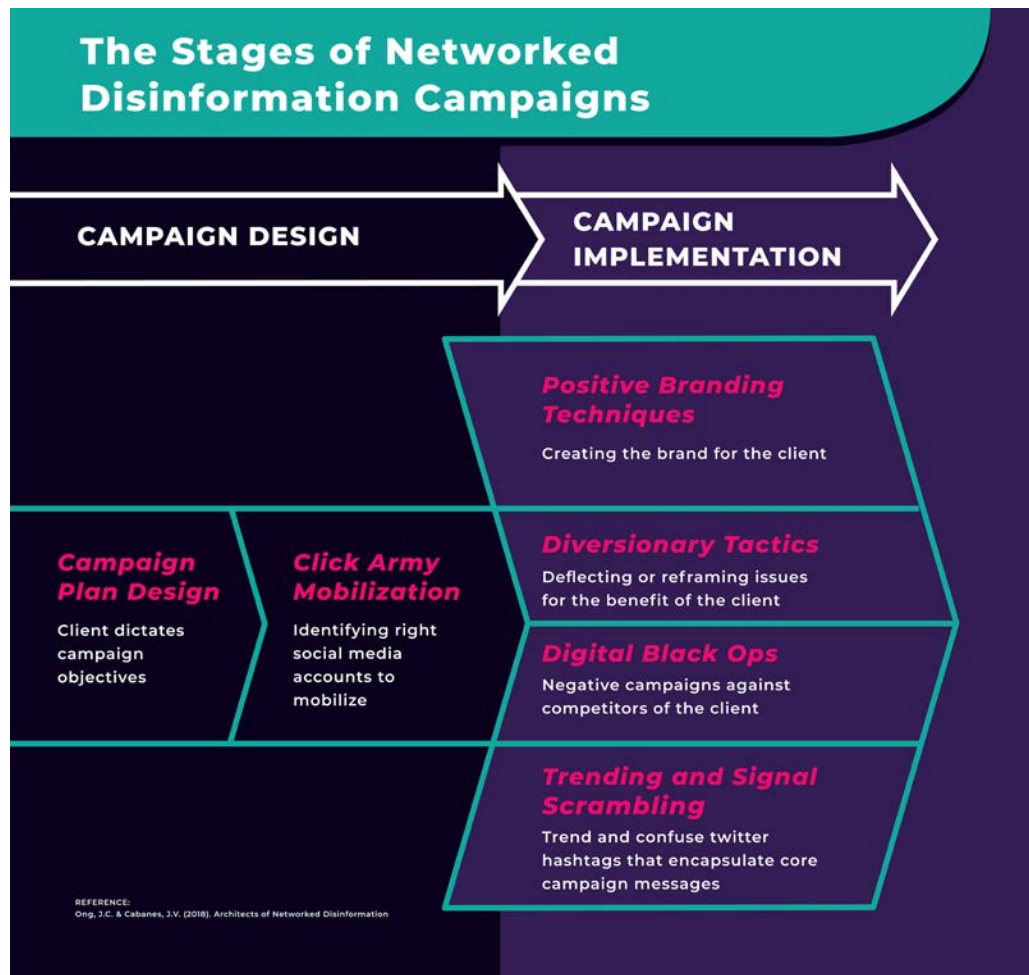


Figure 3. Stages of networked disinformation production

⁸³ Davis 2013.

Stage 1: Campaign Plan Design

This stage is most strongly governed by the principle of controlled interactivity, being primarily the domain of the chief architects of networked disinformation. Here, these high-level political strategists deploy an array of techniques that are well established in corporate marketing.

This stage begins with identifying **key campaign objectives**. Here the high-level strategists always start by listening to the communication concerns raised by political clients who approach them. These concerns might be related to electoral campaigns, a practice that is already well mapped out in political communication scholarship.⁸⁴ However, they might also be related to moments outside the electoral context, where most of the disinformation work lies. In “ordinary times”, the strategists might be asked to seed the personal brand of political clients for future elections or to protect this brand in the face of scandalous issues. Strategists might also be hired to push for issue advocacies and even official national legislation that would be politically or economically beneficial to their clients. Later on in this chapter, we discuss how implementing these objectives might at times involve rolling out tried-and-tested dirty campaign tactics. These range from political silencing and historical revisionism to using misogyny and classism, all of which can perniciously impact on democratic politics.

Identifying the key campaign objectives is, in principle, collaborative, in that the high-level strategists figure these out together with their political clients. It is often the case, however, that the clients do not know or even care enough about campaign plan design to be intensely involved in its intricacies. As the strategist Rachel shared, she once worked on the presidential campaign of a veteran politician who could not be bothered to scrutinize the campaign objectives she drafted. She said, “Compared to corporate clients who are fastidious in nitpicking everything you present them, this candidate, who’s supposed to be very politically experienced, didn’t really understand how the communication game worked. So he just left all of that to me.”

Once the campaign objectives are set, the chief architects of networked disinformation then use another professional technique to solidify their campaign plan design. They craft **core campaign messages** that are supposed to undergird all the disinformation campaign materials that are produced. Strategists draw from political campaigning principles to craft messages that resonate with audience expectations of a candidate’s personality branding or issue advocacy.⁸⁵ They also use their astute instincts and extensive experience in taking the public pulse about politicians and political issues to come up with key themes that unify all the disinformation materials. The strategist Grace, for

⁸⁴ Scammell 2016; see also Davies 2006; Esser and Pfetsch 2004.

⁸⁵ Iyengar and Simon 2000; see also Gloria et al. 2004.

instance, explained to us why the #NasaanAngPangulo (or #WhereIsThePresident) campaign against ex-President Benigno Aquino, Jr. was so successful. She said that this attack mode of hashtag campaigning stoked the public's growing dissatisfaction with then-President Aquino, who seemed to be perpetually absent in the aftermath of major disasters.

The final professional technique that high-level strategists use in this campaign plan design stage is to identify the **audience touch points** for communicating the core campaign messages. Using a strict and coordinated scheduling framework, they disseminate their messages through platforms like Twitter and Facebook as well as campaign materials like hashtags, memes, and fake news write-ups and videos. This is something we return to at the third stage of the networked disinformation production. Here it should be noted that even if networked disinformation campaigns are conducted over digital media, they still have to be done in concert with mainstream media disinformation campaigns. These mainstream media campaigns involve longstanding media-capture practices such as *astro-turfing* or masking the real sponsors of an advertising material to make it appear more authentic or grassroots-driven and, in the specific context of the Philippines, “AC/DC (*attack-collect/defend-collect*)” or paying journalists to write attack pieces on an opponent or to defense pieces for their principal.⁸⁶

High-level strategists also plot out how digital influencers and community-level fake account operators—vis-a-vis key opinion leaders—should carry the core campaign messages. The strategists designate particular roles for these operators: to seed messages, to amplify, to throw shade, or to agitate and provoke discussion. In line with the professional practice of micro-targeting, the strategists also ask these account operators to engage with existing networks of audiences, ranging from celebrity fan clubs to grassroots political communities. This is something we flesh out in the following stage of networked disinformation production.

Stage 2: Click Army Mobilization

This second stage in networked disinformation production involves determining what and how social media accounts should be mobilized in a campaign. Here, collaboration between the different architects of networked disinformation becomes more pronounced. Consequently, tension between the promotional communication principles of controlled interactivity and volatile virality becomes more evident at this stage.

⁸⁶ Hofileña 1998.

The aspiration of chief architects of networked disinformation to controlled interactivity can be seen most clearly in their use of **brand bibles** to carefully construct the Facebook fake account/s that they manage. Central to this is the creation of a manual that details the brand identity of the fake avatar: that is, their social background, personality traits, daily routines, alongside their political stance and their target audience. Because the strategists use these accounts to establish the core campaign messages that digital influencers pick up on, they are keen to ensure message discipline and consistency. This is especially important because the strategists often pass on the cumbersome work of engaging with these accounts to operators working directly under them; a detailed framework for the content and the style of posts keeps the messaging on-brand. Dom shared with us, for example, that one successful account that she created was branded as a “bikini troll”: a highly attractive, well-educated, young woman with a scantily clad profile photo. She said that accounts like this was the easiest way to gain followers and friends. But she also said that there were risks involved, such as receiving dick pics and unsolicited social advances. On the overall, however, such accounts did well in their role to provide “illusions of engagement”.

But even in Facebook fake accounts that have brand bibles, the principle of volatile virality creeps in. As mentioned above, the high-level strategists pass on the 24/7 running of these accounts to lower-level account operators under their employ. This enables the accounts a high degree of algorithmic visibility, as they are able to maintain intense interactivity and engagement with their followers and supporters. This also means, however, that operators may sometimes post materials that are off-brand. As Dom recalls, she once had one more her Facebook accounts go “schizophrenic” because it was manned by different operators at different times of the day. When the operator was relatively competent, then the account would be on-brand with its “bikini troll” performance of an attractive and classy woman. But when the operator was relatively less competent, the account would go temporarily rogue, posting material that undermined the branding of the account. Dom distinctly remembers one operator posting a beach vacation photo with the badly Englished caption “I’m so relax”, which made the strategist feel anything but relaxed.

Meanwhile, the necessity of relying on volatile virality can be seen in the high-level strategists technique of **tapping digital influencers’ social media accounts** to further amplify core campaign messages. In doing this, the strategists sacrifice message discipline for increased message virality. On one hand, the influencer accounts have previously existed and have already been deployed in prior commercial and/or celebrity campaigns. Unlike the Facebook fake accounts that the strategists have built from scratch, these influencer accounts already carry with them a prior branding. Most of them are already established as a celebrity fan page, a politician fan page, or an inspirational quote page, amongst others. This prior branding is something that the strategists have to accommodate in their

campaign design plan. But on the other hand, the previous existence of the digital influencers' social media accounts means that they also have cultivated a large number of organic followers. These might be comprised of fans of celebrity couples, supporters of political candidates, beauty pageant fans, or followers who simply like the quotes, memes, and/or video content being posted. It is this genuine and readily accessible reach with organic followers that the high-level strategists are after.

We learned that in mobilizing social media armies, the public persona of an account should fit its role in a campaign. For attack campaigns, as an example, chief architects look to invite anonymous influencers behind Twitter accounts that are feisty and aggressive. A perfect example of this is an account called *Shutayin Sila sa Sindak* (Kill Them With Fright). This account has a display photo of an angry stick figure that is matched by a cover photo of a gun pointed directly at the viewer. Its bio also says "Boo! You die!" The account is full of mean tweets, expletives, and death threats and is well suited for "digital black ops". As the digital influencer Georgina says, "it's no-nonsense and bitchy, so use it for mudslinging!"

Stage 3: Creative Executions

The final stage of networked disinformation production is where the digital political operators most closely interact with grassroots intermediaries and real supporters. At this stage, the concern of the digital political operators is to translate and implement the campaign plan design into social media posts that can weaponize the impassioned zeal of these intermediaries and supporters. In the way they deploy particular techniques to achieve this work, we once again see the tension between the promotional communication principles of controlled interactivity and volatile virality.

In some of the creative execution techniques, controlled interactivity is more pronounced than volatile virality because of the chief disinformation architects' generally strong control of the messaging. Take for instance the uses of trending and "signal scrambling" on Twitter, which aim to hijack attention in online and mainstream media. These techniques are meant to make specific discussions around a politician's personal branding or policy initiatives become viral on Facebook, so that they subsequently become picked up by mainstream media. The goal here is to exploit mainstream media's vulnerability to reporting items that become popular in social media.⁸⁷

With **trending**, what the high-level strategists do is craft hashtags that they think not only encapsulate a campaign's core messages, but also express these in witty, memorable, and shareable ways. They

⁸⁷ Marwick and Lewis 2017.

would then ask the digital influencers to use their existing Twitter accounts to make these hashtags trend at a time and duration. The strategist Grace told us that she can orchestrate this so precisely that she often uses it as a demo tool for her would-be political clients. For instance, she tells one of her clients “At 6:00 pm go online and I will show you what I can do to your campaign... I always show what I can do instead of making empty promises.” She then has this client observe with her in real-time how her influencers make a hashtag trend globally. Grace proudly goes on to say that the “The client could not believe it because no consultant had given him a worldwide trending hashtag. Needless to say, I got his account.”

Meanwhile, the aim of the high-level strategists with **signal scrambling** is to negate the hashtag of an opposing campaign by preventing it from trending at all. For this, they use an obfuscation tactic that relies on confusing and dividing the people who support a opposing campaign’s hashtag, thereby lowering that hashtag’s rank in Twitter’s list of trending topics. What they do specifically is to craft a decoy hashtag that is similar-looking but syntactically-different from that of the opposing campaigns. They would then have the digital influencers use their Twitter accounts to seed these decoy hashtags that would split the community. As an example of this, Grace explained that they would, for instance, torpedo the hashtag “heart” by deploying hashtags like “he5rt” or “h3art”.

Despite the predominance of the high-level strategists in designing the messages for the two Twitter techniques discussed above, the digital influencers nevertheless still have crucial translation work to perform. To be sure, trending and signal scrambling are governed primarily by controlled interactivity, in that the strategist expect their hashtags to be used and the main goal of the fake account operators is for the campaign to hit number one. As the influencer Georgina narrates, what she does is to set a certain time when she and a team of 10 influencers are to create posts that carry the prescribed hashtag. This prompts the followers of their accounts--comprised of some fake account operators but mostly of grassroots supporters--to retweet their posts. But the two techniques are also predisposed to volatile virality, as the digital influencers have their own ways of achieving engagement that they express through their individually tailored posts. As Georgina explains, some influencer accounts use not only popular vernaculars, but also bikini pictures and shirtless celebrities, just to get likes and retweets. This is also a function of the financial incentive schemes that reward influencers’ promotional labor according to metrics of reach and engagement.

In some other creative execution techniques, the principle of volatile virality is much more marked than that of controlled interactivity. This is especially true for techniques that require the digital influencers to use their understanding of popular vernaculars to craft creative and engaging posts that can generate likes and shares. These principally include implementing positive branding, digital black ops, and diversionary tactics. To be sure, these techniques are all anchored on the high-level

strategists' campaign plan designs and so have message discipline built into them. But then again, these techniques also require the high-level strategists to allow the digital influencers a high degree of flexibility and even agency in their translation work, so that message virality can be achieved.

The goal of the digital influencers in **positive branding** is to help push for the personal branding that the high-level strategists have created for their political clients. Conversely, in conducting **digital black ops**, they contribute to intensifying attacks on the personal branding of their political clients' opponents. These techniques have their roots in the well-established political communication strategies of positive and negative campaigning that have long dominated mainstream media election advertisements. Like traditional positive campaigning, positive branding aims to market political clients in their best light. This can be mean highlighting the unique selling point of their personalities, like posting memes that cast Duterte as a politician with a simple lifestyle, fearless attitude, and strong political will.⁸⁸ And it can also be as insidious as revising the atrocious personal or familial history of clients to put them in better light, like sharing YouTube videos that tell a revisionist account of the 20-year Marcos regime as “the golden age of the Philippines” in a bid to restore the political luster of the Marcos family (see Figure 4).⁸⁹ Meanwhile, digital black ops is the online version of the traditional black ops done via the mainstream media. Often deployed in concert, these techniques



Figure 4. The Marcos regime as the Golden Age of the Philippines

⁸⁸ Cantera 2016.

⁸⁹ Compare a sample revisionist YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0fsuPU6sr8>) and the anti-revisionist 'Martial Law Museum' project of Ateneo de Manila University (<https://martiallawmuseum.ph/>)

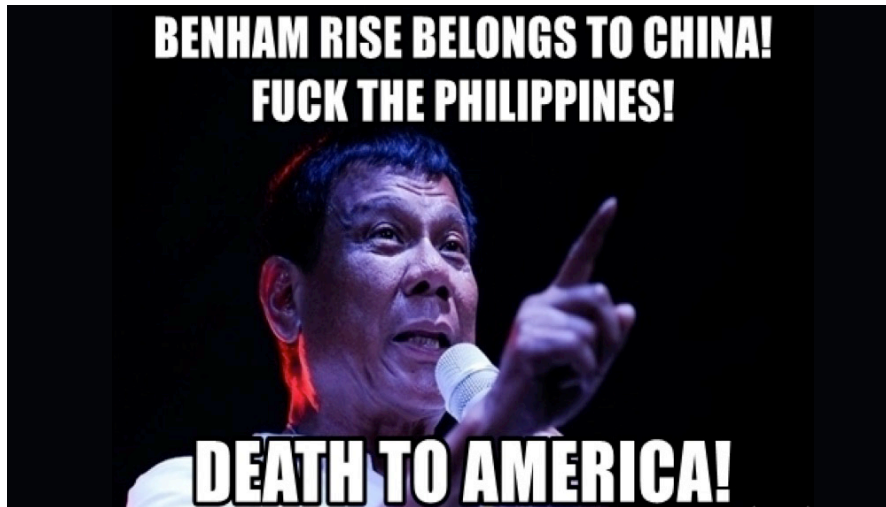


Figure 5. Duterte as China's loyal lapdog

rely on mudslinging, rumormongering, and innuendo to take down a political opponent's brand. One meme, for example, challenges Duterte's image of being fearless and insinuates that when it comes to China, he acts like a loyal lapdog (see Figure 5). Studies reveal that an unfortunate cumulative effect of such content is an increasing disenchantment with democratic processes such as elections.⁹⁰

Unlike mainstream media electoral ads that carry the strong message discipline of most mainstream media content, however, the content created by the influencers can be much more volatile. In one of the positive branding campaigns that Dom oversaw for a political client, she said that she encountered issues with the amplification strategies that one of the influencers used. She said that this particular influencer made the decision to generate likes and shares about their campaign by pairing the messages she had designed for the politician with shirtless photos of male celebrities. "That totally undermined the squeaky clean image I was building for the client!", she said.

As Figure 5 above indicates, what is troubling with the translation work that digital influencers do for digital black ops is that this often involves performing a populist political style. This generates tremendous virality among grassroots supporters, but also brings toxicity to the tenor of public political discussions. Echoing the work of Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, some of the key elements in the style that the influencers use are: appealing to a community of discontent, evoking a state of crisis, and using incivil language.⁹¹ Some of the influencers we talked to shared with us that what they like about being anonymous is that one can just weave in and out of their online avatars. Influencer Michael, for instance, shares, "being a character or a 'pseudo' is only very fleeting because you are not the person. You just assume that personality. You trend for a while and then move on."

⁹⁰ Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Bennet and Iyengar 2008.

⁹¹ Moffitt and Tormey 2014.

The digital influencers use a mix of the elements of the populist political style in two key ways. One is when they bring up divisive issues that push grassroots supporters towards expressing hatred over people who are perceived to be on the other side of the divide. Take for instance the posts holding to account former President Benigno Aquino III and his allies for the mishaps in the post-Typhoon Haiyan recovery (see Figure 6).

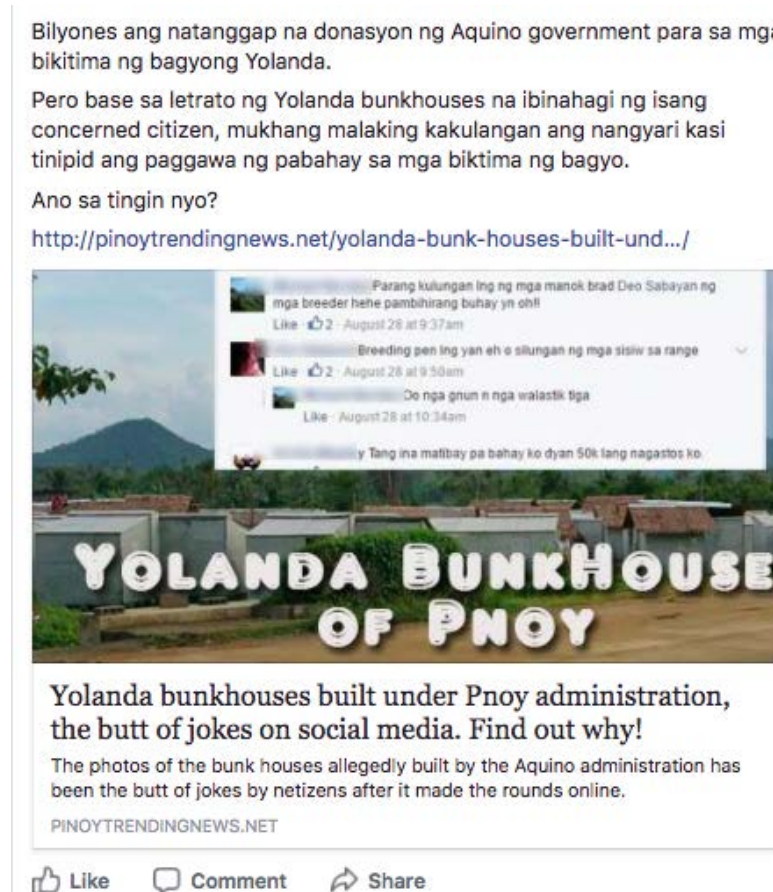


Figure 6. Three years after Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda

Although the posts themselves are not necessarily incivil, they invite and incite toxic comments flooded with hate speech that is not only vitriolic, but can also be misogynist and racist, saying things like “[President Aquino and his Liberal Party] deserve to be punished by hanging...They do not have a heart...they only think of themselves...not of the many...they are morons.”

The other way is when they themselves adopt incivil communication . Drawing on their expertise in Filipino-style snark, wit, and indignation, they fan people’s feelings of anger, resentment, and powerlessness towards the state of Philippine democratic politics. A favorite target of anti-Duterte campaigns is Mocha Uson, one of the most visible pro-Duterte key opinion leaders online. Dredging

up her past career as a sexy star, these campaigns can cross into misogynistic territory. They slutshame Mocha, harping on conservative Filipino tropes about womanhood by showing provocative images of her and insinuating that she is not “disente” (decent) (see Figure 7). These kinds of post attract equally misogynistic comments like “Mocha Uson ang pambansang pokpok!” (Mocha Uson the national slut!) and “Wala ka nang hahanapin pa lahat inilabas...” (There’s nothing more to ask as everything has been revealed...).

In between positive branding and digital black ops is **diversionary tactics**. What the digital influencers seek to do is to change the course of a narrative or reframe an issue when these undermine the personal branding that the high-level strategists have designed for a political client. To do this, they help push for a new issue that will deflect the original issue and distract the public. This entails crafting disinformation materials that shift the spotlight to something positive about their client or to something negative about their client’s opponents. In crafting these materials, there is once again a strong tendency for message volatilities that similar to the ones described above.



Figure 7. Misogyny against Mocha Uson

Box Text 6.

Anatomy of #IlibingNa: A Dictator Buried as a Hero

The controversy surrounding the burial of former President Ferdinand Marcos in the Heroes' Cemetery had been a longstanding, if dormant, issue since 1989. It recently regained public prominence, however, following the order of President Rodrigo Duterte on 7 August 2016 and a ruling from the Supreme Court on 8 November 2016, both of which paved the way for this burial to proceed. This was met by opposition from those in the public who said that Marcos did not deserve such an honor, as his dictatorial regime was characterized by, among other things, widespread human rights violations and government corruption. Despite this outcry, Marcos was in the end given a hero's burial on 19 November 2016.

In the interim between Duterte's order and the Supreme Court decision and the eventual burial of Marcos, we followed the Facebook and Twitter discussions around the Ilibing Na (which roughly translates to Allow the Burial) campaign. The online activities that we saw closely resembled the stages of a networked disinformation campaign. We saw how social media was used as an integral platform in mobilizing support for the burial campaign. We specifically observed how online petitions, memes, videos, and articles from websites with unverified content were weaponized to challenge existing narratives about Marcos, bring different frames on the burial issue, as well as attack critics of the burial.

The campaign objective of the Ilibing Na campaign seemed to be focused on getting public support for a hero's burial for Ferdinand Marcos. This rode on President Duterte's opinion that Marcos deserved to be buried "because he was a great president and he was a hero" and, moreover, that the burial would catalyze "national healing". It similarly echoed the pleas that Marcos' children released through official statements and news interviews in mainstream media. Former Senator Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. said, for instance, that he "hope[d]

that this [the SC decision would] lead the nation towards healing as [the country] endeavor[ed] to move the country forward". Governor Imee Marcos, also asked her father's critics to "let go" of "any anger and bitterness" and "forgive and move on".

The campaign hashtags carried the sentiments above: #NoToHate, #YesToHealing, and of course #IlibingNa. They clearly encapsulated the core campaign messages of healing, moving on, and unity. Meanwhile, the campaign used Twitter and Facebook as key audience touchpoints. It used social media accounts with large followers of Marcos loyalists and supporters to disseminate the hashtags and promote community discussions on the burial issue.

Through our online participant observation, we witnessed not only the use of positive branding, digital black ops, and diversionary tactics, but also how these stoked the impassioned zeal of the Ilibing Na campaign's grassroots intermediaries and ordinary supporters.

The campaign's positive branding efforts included heart tugging graphics with biblical verses and life quotes that emphasized Filipino culture of bayanihan (or community spirit) and religiosity. In an attempt to move beyond discussions of reparations and justice for the



Figure 8. #YesToHealing

⁹² Ferdinand Marcos was popularly called Apo among Ilocanos.

victims of the Marcos regime, the campaign also used captions pushed for national unity, peace, respect for differences, forgiveness of past mistakes, helping each other, solidarity, and moving on (see Figure 8).

Together with this, the campaign used diversionary tactics to elide allegations of human rights violations and corruption during the term of Ferdinand Marcos. To reframe the narrative, social media posts highlighted Marcos' achievements. These included memes that showcased the public infrastructure built during his term and that carried the hashtag #SalamatApo (#ThankYouApo).⁹² These also included posts that shifted the critical spotlight on Marcos' opponents, such as this meme that playfully contrasts the achievements of Marcos to that of then-President Benigno Aquino III (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Marcos versus Aquino

Finally, we also observed the campaign deploying digital black ops that targeted prominent critics of the Marcos burial and of the Marcoses in general. Take for example the post of a pro-Marcos Facebook about Vice President Leni Robredo's opposition to the burial. It reposted a news video clip of Robredo's interview with the accompanying caption: "So why does Leni lugaw queen disapprove the burial of Marcos in the Heroes' Cemetery? Watch and learn how crazy and insane Leni is" (see Figure 10). The post elicited over 16,000 reactions (likes, heart, angry reacts), 28,624 shares, and over 7,200 comments and video viewed over 1 million times. Most of the comments were incivil and vitriolic, with commentators bashing Robredo with different expletives. They called her called her a "bitch", "stupid", "insane", told her to "shut up" and went as far as wishing her to die with her three daughters. It also became an avenue to express resentment towards the Liberal Party, to which Robredo belongs.



Figure 10. Vice President Leni Robredo's opposition to Marcos' hero's burial

Networked Disinformation Production as Hijacking Democratic Discussion

The tension between controlled interactivity and volatile virality of networked disinformation has led to some interrelated consequences for democratic public discussion. First is that because digital influencers are adept at identifying and bringing to the fore such issues in social media, one outcome of disinformation work has been to open up spaces wherein communities of discontent can express previously unheard sentiments. This has become especially salient in a country where ordinary people sometimes think that the mainstream news media neglect their most pressing concerns.⁹³ Take for instance the growing concern that the precarious middle class and the working class have about drugs and criminality: from the OFWs who worry that their children back home might become addicts to the call center workers who are afraid for their safety when they go home at odd hours late at night or early in the morning to the typhoon-affected communities who are concerned about young people turning to drugs as part of their coping mechanisms in the midst of disaster recovery. As Nicole Curato says, the drug issue has been a “slow-moving” disaster that has been simmering the background for quite some time already but had not gained extensive media coverage until Duterte’s presidential campaign and subsequent victory.⁹⁴

At the same time, however, this opening up of spaces for discontent has also meant that the architects of networked information to more easily **hijack people’s sentiments and sow public divisiveness**. Here it is important to remember that the primary intent of digital political operators is not necessarily to create vibrant public political discussions. They instead seek to further the goals of their political clients by innovating on tried-and-tested corporate and political marketing techniques, from positive branding to digital black ops. They also exploit their understanding of the public’s ways of engaging with political personalities and issues. Most perniciously, the populist style that influencers use to spark divisive discussions and fan the flames of discontent inevitably normalizes and amplifies toxicity in public discussions. Focused as individuals are on hatefully addressing each other, they are hindered from engaging in meaningful conversations.

At the same, these spaces of discontent have allowed the architects of networked disinformation to **silence political dissent and enact historical revisionism**. They use the techniques of trending and signal scrambling to torpedo dissenting perspectives. They also seed content that cunningly retell sordid political histories of presidential regimes into fairytales of a Philippine golden age. The rise of these vitriolic digital media spaces and information disorder online are critical developments in countries with a fragile democratic culture like Philippines. Despite—or perhaps because of—the country’s long if troubled liberal democratic project, there is currently such a weakened belief in this system that some people increasingly look to countries like Singapore as model of “managed democracy” or “democracy without liberalism” as a better form of governance.⁹⁵

⁹³ Cabañes and Cornelio 2017.

⁹⁴ Curato 2016.

⁹⁵ Chua 2017; Quah 2010.



Chapter 5

Collective Interventions in the Face of Complicit Trolling

Our findings emphasize how networked disinformation is not authored by exceptional evil individuals, but is a collective and professionalized production. The current approach taken by opposing political camps in the Philippine context is to name and shame particular enemies, a digital witchhunt that includes cyberbullying and slutshaming known influencers and exposing anonymous influencers and bloggers. Seen in the light of our findings on disinformation production, the demonization or glorification of singular online figures fails to understand or address the roots of networked disinformation. As our research reveals, these roots run deep entrenched in systematized labor and incentive structures that have been normalized in, and even professionalized by, the creative and digital industries. To recognize only heroes or villains in the production of fake news leaves us blind to the machine behind the madness, and thus leaves democratic discourse vulnerable to its workings.

We have seen that chief disinformation architects draw from their leadership experience in the promotional industries when applying tried-and-tested techniques of crafting “core campaign messages” and developing “brand bibles” for political clients. But since the digital underground exists outside of traditional corporate advertising self-regulation and election campaign finance legislation, architects of disinformation are also able to deploy new techniques such as “signal scrambling” and “digital black ops” that hijack our attention and weaponize populist public sentiment.

Knowing the architecture of networked disinformation allows us to better understand why and how different creative and digital workers join the digital underground and become complicit with political trolling. Chief architects aim to gain power and prestige by establishing themselves as pioneers of a new industry. Meanwhile, those from the precarious middle-class seek financial stability, often after experiences of rejection and exploitation from the mainstream media industry. Recognizing these motivations enables us to pinpoint specific vulnerabilities not only in codes of ethics and regulatory

practice, but also in existing labor arrangements in the creative economy in view of finding better ways to support precarious digital workers.

While we emphasize the significant impact of the structural and institutional contexts in which disinformation workers are embedded, we do not fully absolve these workers of their moral responsibility. As we have discovered from our interviews, these individuals have capacities for agency in the ways that they translate, execute, or even resist within the production process. The desire for their own political, social, and financial gain drives their complicity and collusion with evil infrastructures, refusal to be held accountable for the impact of their actions, and use of moral justifications to evade responsibility, or indeed, assign it to others. While our ethnographically inspired approach begins with an imperative for empathy to understand the conditions that push people to engage in precarious disinformation work, we assign the most culpability here to the chief architects who are at the top level of influence and benefit most from the architecture they have built.

This project contributes to current efforts of scholars, journalists, and civil society groups to think through innovative interventions and address the complex challenges of disinformation and fake news in national and global contexts. The work of US scholars Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan is at the forefront of proposing a comprehensive set of recommendations that takes into consideration the variety of stakeholders in information disorders.⁹⁶ In the Philippine context, we observe diverse efforts such as 1) technology policy groups and news organizations lobbying big tech giants such as Google and Facebook to develop country-specific regulatory measures that address fake news and offensive speech,⁹⁷ 2) fact-checking initiatives from journalist organizations,⁹⁸ 3) media literacy modules developed by academics aimed at high school students,⁹⁹ and 4) civil-society led hackathons that aim to design technological interventions to identifying disinformation and fake accounts.

Building on this body of work, we propose below recommendations to key stakeholders in the specific national context of the Philippines, contributing to the global conversation about values and principles in the regulation and legislation of digital platforms and the creative economy.

⁹⁶ Wardle and Darakshan 2017.

⁹⁷ The Foundation for Media Alternatives, a non-government organization, has engaged with tech giants like Google and Facebook as part of their work on “information and communications technologies (ICTs) for democratization and popular empowerment.” See more of their initiatives on internet rights and policies here: <http://fma.ph/>. Maria Ressa, the CEO of online news site Rappler, has attempted to lobby Facebook to take responsibility in combating “state-sponsored hate”, see Etter 2016.

⁹⁸ Vera Files, a nonprofit independent media organization, is a signatory of the International Fact Checking Network. One of their initiatives is the “Vera Files Fact Check” which tracks false claims, misleading statements and flip flops of public officials and debunks it with factual information. See Vera Files 2018.

⁹⁹ Academics, civil society, and media companies have initiated media literacy initiatives and public fora to draw awareness on digital disinformation. In 2016, public seminars like the Digital Youth Summit hosted by Facebook and Mano Amigo and Truth, Trust and Democracy in the Age of Selfies, Trolls, and Bots hosted by Rappler created intersectoral conversations among tech companies, journalists, academics, and youth leaders. Academics such as those from the Department of Journalism at the University of the Philippines Diliman are developing news literacy modules. The Communication Foundation for Asia is also spearheading an initiative with academics from De La Salle University to publish a textbook on media literacy for senior high school students.

The argument this report makes is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the complex problem of networked disinformation. While efforts to blacklist fake news websites, expose fake accounts, or vilify divisive digital influencers are well-meaning, these solutions do not address the underlying causes of the problem. Future research can pay greater attention to the work hierarchies and institutions that professionalize and incentivize 'paid troll' work. This of course means building on the emerging critical scholarship on the operations of power by global corporations such as Facebook and Google, which possess significantly concentrated and as yet unregulated power over our new social information infrastructures.¹⁰⁰ Equally important, however, this involves understanding local contexts of disinformation production and the ways that architects of disinformation evade responsibility and entice other workers to join them in the digital underground.

Recommendations to Stakeholders

What can the advertising and PR industry do?

- 1 Encourage transparency and accountability in political marketing through industry self-regulatory commissions¹⁰¹ that require disclosure of political consultancies. It is a long-time industry “open secret” that executives in boutique agencies and even some multinational agencies manage political accounts. Making digital political campaigns more easily traceable and identifiable to corporate partners can help members of the industry become more accountable for, and respond to issues and questions about, the content and outcomes of their political campaigns.
- 2 Develop self-regulatory standards in the digital influencer industry. Attempts to professionalize the influencer industry following the growth of influencer companies that act as suppliers to digital advertising firms have primarily focused on maximizing opportunities for monetization potential. Undisclosed paid sponsorships¹⁰² and collaborating with anonymous digital influencers reveal ethical gaps and vulnerabilities in the digital influencer economy. Anonymity in the influencer economy enables people to elide accountability in their participation in political campaigns.

¹⁰⁰ Sabeel Rahman 2017.

¹⁰¹ Currently, the Ad Standards Council, as a self-regulating commission in the country, review and resolve disputes on advertising content and its social implications. As mandated by Republic Act 7394 or the Consumer Act of the Philippines, the mission of the Ad Standards Council is to ensure consumer protection by reviewing advertising materials according to an industry code of ethics. While digital advertising of corporate brands is reviewed, the use of digital influencers for PR purposes is wholly unregulated. Political marketing consultancies are also ungoverned by industry commissions though occasionally guided by individual agency policy (i.e., some multinational agencies forbid taking on political clients).

¹⁰² The Marketing Monitor 2016 published by Kantar TNS reveals that hiring digital influencers for social-media marketing is increasingly used throughout the ad and PR industry in Asia-Pacific, where 24% of the 2,250 marketers surveyed used paid influencers for corporate sponsorship. See Kantar TNS 2016.

- 3 Develop and enforce stronger codes of ethics and self-regulatory standards that reward and encourage transparency and accountability in digital marketing.¹⁰³ Current regulatory boards are focused on evaluating content of traditional media advertising materials, leaving out recent innovations in digital marketing and public relations. Industry practices such as native advertising, which normalize subtle forms of deception in corporate marketing, can be disincentivized (i.e. through financial penalties).
- 4 Improve conditions for creative workers, particularly for young creative professionals, who are vulnerable to slipping into the digital underground. For example, creative agencies can improve systems of mentorship and support and rewarding professionalism and ethical practice.

What can policymakers do?

- 1 Develop a Political Campaign Transparency Act that updates existing election campaign finance regulation to include digital campaigning. While politicians are required by the Commission on Elections to disclose campaign donors and their campaigns spends in traditional media platforms such as tv and radio, they are not yet required to disclose campaign spends in online platforms. The public has the right to know the full extent of campaign spending across both traditional and new media platforms. More comprehensive data would also allow corruption watchdogs to verify politicians' total campaign spends against the stated personal income they are required by law to disclose as public officials.
- 2 This new Political Campaign Transparency Act should require politicians to disclose the political campaign materials for broad public discussion and reflection (and not necessarily for regulation or censorship). The public has the right to know the quantity and quality of politicians' television and radio advertising materials but also the viral videos, trending hashtags, and Facebook advertisements they purchase.
- 3 Commission and support research on networked disinformation.
- 4 Support civil society groups that lobby big tech companies such as Facebook and Google to disclose ad buys in the context of election campaigning.

¹⁰³ The Philippines reports growth in both total advertising and digital advertising revenues. Among Asia-Pacific countries, the Philippines records the largest increase in ad revenue in 2016 according to the report by IHS Markit 2017. In terms of digital advertising, the Philippines revenue grew from US\$291 million in 2016 to US\$345 million according to the data from Statista 2017 (see more data on Philippine digital advertising here: <https://www.statista.com/outlook/216/123/digital-advertising/philippines#>).

What can civil society groups do?

- 1 Work with academics and media companies to develop collective interventions to address networked disinformation.
- 2 Collaborate with technology experts to develop technological solutions, such as through hackathons that leverage on the insights of academics, journalists, and policymakers across various fields.
- 3 Develop inclusive and representative advisory committees to advise on research, reportage, and interventions in disinformation and fake news production.
- 4 Link up with global institutions for a broader perspective to the problems of disinformation and mediatized populism. Learn from and consider the similarities and differences of the Philippine context with other countries and evaluate the viability and applicability of policy and technological interventions used abroad to the local case.

What can media companies do?

- 1 Ensure strong and consistent ethical standards across all media. Entertainment and commercial placements shoehorned into news items contribute to the trivialization of factual and public service content. Media organizations should explicitly distinguish promotional content in order to differentiate it from news content.
- 2 Move away from personality-based news coverage of networked disinformation, particularly narratives that confers villain or hero status onto individuals. Provide sense-making perspectives that sketch out the broader infrastructure of deception work and the policies that have normalized and professionalized it.
- 3 Promote inclusive representation and encourage diverse viewpoints. Ownership of traditional media companies is widely known by the public to be dominated by elite families and oligarchs. Media professionals thus have a greater responsibility to seek out and amplify new or unheard voices.
- 4 Foster inclusive and transparent approaches to initiatives in fact-checking. Target the production of disinformation and fake news across the political spectrum.



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